

**THE POLITICS OF CRITICISM  
AND THE QUESTION OF MORALITY:  
A CRITICAL STUDY OF F. R. LEAVIS,  
JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND LIONEL TRILLING**

**PHD THESIS BY  
GEORGE AVGOUSTIS**

**THESIS SUPERVISOR  
AZZEDINE HADDOUR**

**FRENCH DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The object of my research is the examination of the ambivalent relationship of ethics and politics in the context of twentieth-century literary criticism. The main and most general thesis that I put forward is that all moral discourses are directly complicit with the broader political and economic realities within which they are articulated. In my case, I attempt to show the validity of this proposition by examining three instances where literary criticism and ethics have converged, each instance belonging to a different national and ideological paradigm. In doing so I attempt to identify those elements that may be said to constitute a sort of an archaeology, in the Foucaultean sense, of the contemporary trend in literary theory that openly espouses a moral/ethical problematic. I do this by looking closely at the critical work of F. R. Leavis, Jean-Paul Sartre and Lionel Trilling.

In the process of discussing the work of these critics I attempt to show to what extent their moral-critical discourse was determined by their own ideological assumptions, on the one hand, and the general historical context, on the other. In my view, their critical work, with the notable exception of Sartre's, betrays a double need. Firstly, the need to distance themselves from the denotative language of politics and secondly, the need to articulate desires that are thoroughly political in their nature and consequences. In doing Leavis and Trilling, in contradistinction to Sartre, only succeeded in mystifying the conditions that enabled the articulation of their literary and cultural critiques and thus disassociated themselves from social, political and economic interests.

Finally, my work implicitly argues for the need for the rearticulation of the relation between ethics and material interests not only in the rather confined space of literary criticism but in all aspects of critical endeavour and social practice.

You gentlemen who think you have a mission  
To purge us of the seven deadly sins  
Should first sort out the basic food position  
Then start your preaching, that's where it begins.  
You lot who preach restraint and watch your waist as well  
Should learn, for once, the way the world is run:  
However much you twist or whatever lies you tell  
Food is the first thing. Morals follow on.  
So first make sure that those who are now starving  
Get proper helpings when we all start carving.

What keeps mankind alive? The fact that millions  
Are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced and oppressed.  
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance  
In keeping its humanity repressed.  
And for once you must try not to shriek the facts:  
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.

Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, (Act II, Scene VI,  
Second Threepenny Finale: What Keeps Mankind Alive?)



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: ETHICS, POLITICS AND LITERARY CRITICISM .....	6
2. LITERATURE AND THE MORAL DUTY OF ENLIGHTENED MINORITIES:	
THE CRITICISM OF F. R. LEAVIS .....	60
3. THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RADICAL FREEDOM:	
THE CRITICISM OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE .....	119
4. LITERATURE AND THE MORAL VALUE OF LIBERALISM:	
THE CRITICISM OF LIONEL TRILLING .....	181
5. CONCLUSION .....	238
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	274

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## INTRODUCTION:

### ETHICS, POLITICS AND LITERARY CRITICISM

‘Shall we, then, casually allow our children to listen to any old stories,  
made up by just anyone, and to take into their minds views which, on the  
whole, contradict those we’ll want them to have as adults?’

‘No, we won’t allow that at all.’

‘So our first job, apparently, is to oversee the work of the story-writers,  
and to accept any good story they write, but reject the others. We’ll let nurses  
and mothers tell their children the acceptable ones, and we’ll have them devote  
themselves far more to using these stories to form their children’s minds  
than they do to using their hands to form their bodies. However, we’ll have to  
disallow most of the stories they currently tell.’

Plato, ‘The Republic’<sup>1</sup>

Ever since Plato, to take a widely accepted starting point in the evolution of Western thought, cultural and more specifically literary criticism has been considered and practised as an essentially moral activity. Often instructive, corrective or normative and always engaged with a cultural activity intimately connected with human lives and the social welfare of the community, literary criticism articulated as clearly as it was historically possible the concern with the moral effect that telling stories had not only on the people who heard or read them but most importantly on the society within which those stories were heard, read and regarded as sources of inspiration. Therefore moral, social, and, as I shall argue later on, ultimately political is the concern with whether a certain narrative not only pleases but also instructs in such a fashion as to vie with the established social norms of a certain community. This

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Robin Waterfield, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 71.

political dimension of the moral/ethical discourse in literary criticism lies at the very centre of this study.

#### BASIC CONCEPTS: ETHICS AND MORALITY

Before I embark on a detailed discussion of the issues that underlie my work here, I wish to introduce the basic concepts that inform the subsequent discussion by beginning with the concepts of ethics and morality. Although I think that in the context of my work the rigorous conceptual distinction between ethics and morality is not a *sine qua non* for the strength of the particular arguments I put forth, I nevertheless believe that a preliminary examination of what exactly these two concepts signify may be constructive for the fact that their elucidation makes ethical criticism a far more intelligible endeavour.<sup>2</sup>

Ethics can be understood in at least two different, yet complementary, ways. Firstly, ethics in a narrow sense can, and often does, stand for morality, or moral beliefs and practices. In this narrow sense ethics is not a field of inquiry, but rather its object: the moral life of human beings. This is an informal usage of the term 'ethics' and it seldom appears in an academic context. Secondly, ethics in a wider sense refers to the field of inquiry known as moral philosophy and this is the standard usage of the term in the context that matters to me here. Another way to put this is to reformulate the above distinction as one between morality and ethics, very much in accordance with modern moral philosophy that does indeed make such a distinction. In what follows I shall be using the term 'morality' as relating to culturally endorsed modes of human conduct, sustained through time by normative judgements and positive or negative sanctions. Morality, to use Zygmunt Bauman's apt phrase, will be treated as if it signified "a possibly comprehensive inventory of moral problems" (Bauman 1993: 1)

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<sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge a rigorous distinction between ethics and morality or between an ethical theory, philosophy, or problematic and a moral one is not always made explicitly especially in current ethical criticism. Among the many points of entry into this area of philosophical inquiry one that is relevant to ethical criticism is Nussbaum, 1990: 169n. For a discussion of the rather loose way ethical critics use moral concepts see Diffey, 1975 and Buell, 2000. Another useful discussion of ethics and morality from a perspective largely influenced by the work of Michel Foucault see Guillory, 2000.

and, I would add, appropriate solutions to those problems. Ethics, on the other hand, will primarily signify the investigation of substantive moral positions, the theorization of the existent moral codes, the establishing of criteria for the appropriateness of particular actions. In other words ethics will be regarded as the philosophical systematisation of that which is so varied and often contradictory in the realm of everyday life.

Yet another way of putting this could be by emphasizing the difference between ethics and its uses. By that I refer to the distance that separates the discursive formation (the ethical), on the one hand, and its practical application (the moral), on the other. I do not wish to imply that there is any sort of ontological gap between the two but rather that they are two distinct instances of the same thing. Theorising about morality and the actual practices that emanate from such a discourse are inextricably linked and dialectically related.<sup>3</sup> The one can hardly make any sense (and even if it did how relevant would it be?) without examining the other as well. I find this distinction useful only to the extent that it aids one in identifying two separate but inherently related levels of inquiry.

One more point regarding the nature of the moral/ethical has to do with the fact that we speak of ethics only when we are primarily dealing with the question of 'good' and 'bad/evil', when we, often implicitly, ask the question, which underlies all moral thinking as far back as Ancient Greece: "How should a human being live?" A question that also invites another one as its complement: "What do good and evil really mean and how can we distinguish the one from the other?" Yet, once posed, these questions necessitate a certain postulate, a necessary presupposition that can make them conceptually valid. Put simply, any such questions arise within a more or less structured social framework. A human being, all

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<sup>3</sup> Hegel, in his *Philosophy of Right*, was the first to distinguish among *Recht* (abstract right), *Moralität* (morality) and *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life). *Sittlichkeit* which is the level where the dialectical synthesis of the objective good (*Recht*) with the subjectivity of the will (*Moralität*) takes place is to a great extent this socialized space that the contemporary concept of morality alludes to.

<sup>4</sup> I do not wish to go into the details of the distinction between 'bad' and 'evil'. Suffice to say that I am taking it from Nietzsche, in whose *On The Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche 1994: 21-27) one may find the full exposition of his views regarding this distinction.

alone in total isolation would not need ethics; survival and self-preservation would be his sole objectives. Ethical inquiry cannot be a part of an asocial universe. Therefore, I regard the concepts of ethics and morality as inherently socio-political and I do not assume that this essentially sociopolitical character is merely a contingent feature of moral concepts. Any ethical or moral discourse cannot but be fundamentally social and therefore profoundly political, even when such a discourse is not articulated in direct relation to questions of power. This is then my approach: ethics is to be understood as the discourse on a particular mode of conduct of human beings vis-à-vis themselves within the framework of a structured community, where the primary code through which this discourse is articulated is the one based on the binary opposition of 'good' vs. 'bad/evil'.

However, the answers to the questions I posed above constitute the premises of other discourses as well, apart from those manifestly ethical, moral, or simply moralising. They constitute the often-unacknowledged premises of all political discourses as well. They are also the questions to which ethical criticism seeks pertinent answers, in its case to be found not in abstract thought, as in the case of philosophy, but in literature.

Before I begin my discussion of the central issues of my work, I wish to say a few things about ethics as a philosophical enterprise. The particular qualities of ethics as a discursive formation and most crucially its current status as a discipline in the humanities are important for any understanding of the often unacknowledged conceptual premises of contemporary ethical criticism.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS: AN OVERVIEW OF A PROBLEMATIC ENTERPRISE

It is extremely difficult to give a comprehensive account of ethics while at the same time doing justice to all the disparate and often contradictory conceptions of what ethics is ultimately about. There are of course some widely agreed upon points of reference in evidence in any dictionary of philosophical terms. Yet one can hardly deny that the plethora

of definitions of moral philosophy makes it increasingly difficult to isolate those fundamental concepts that will aid one in delineating a conceptual space for ethics. There is for example a wide gap that separates metaethics with its insistence on logical and epistemological questions regarding moral arguments and utilitarian ethics which bestows moral value to facts according to their favourable or unfavourable consequences on people. Another huge gap separates those who take their inspiration from Kant and his ethics based on the concept of duty and those who are inclined to view Aristotle's ethics based on the concept of virtue as the better alternative for a viable moral philosophy. In addition to these, one has to work his way through a multitude of distinctly modern binary oppositions governing moral philosophy, oppositions such as: descriptivism/prescriptivism, reason/emotion, justice or duty/care, goodness/value, absolutism/relativism etc. What all this conceptual inflation signifies is that ethics as a philosophical discipline is crippled by a proliferation of discourses, each of which is attempting to occupy the centre while at the same time displacing the others. But how are we to understand the reasons for such a multiplicity of discourses each professing to offer the best view of what is ethical or moral and what is not?

Alasdair MacIntyre has famously answered this question by asserting that we moderns have irretrievably lost the capacity to think cogently in as far as moral questions are concerned because we have lost the single most important capacity for coherent moral thinking: the idea of a common good, the *summum bonum*. In his seminal *After Virtue* (1981) MacIntyre proposes that unless a community is bound by shared beliefs and a common conception of what is the *telos* of human life there is little chance that fundamental questions about values can be given cogent answers. MacIntyre argues that unless a community has tacitly agreed on what precisely life's ultimate goal is there can be no way of resolving differences in moral issues. For any such attempt will ultimately come up against the fact that the first principles of those engaged in a debate – principles which sustain and guide their choices – are radically and irreconcilably different. MacIntyre seeks to show why today moral

issues are bound to remain unresolved by arguing that we are in fact living in the shadow of one of the Enlightenment's grand failures, namely its inability to reconcile the surface contradictions generated by a deep structure which was set in motion with the advent of what we now call modernity. MacIntyre's extremely important argument is that the history of the last five or six centuries shows us that something very basic in the composition of our societies has been missing ever since the beginning of the great historical change that saw capitalism substituting feudalism and thus becoming the dominant economic system of the West. What is missing, he suggests, is a consensus regarding the nature of humankind's essential good. The reason for that is that the gross inequalities generated by the gradual domination of capitalist relations of production in conjunction with the gradual loss of power of the Church and the concomitant ineffectiveness of the Christian dogma have all made our societies gradually reach a stage in history when their tensions and antagonisms are so strong that it has become increasingly hard to achieve any viable consensus on fundamental issues.

MacIntyre goes on to argue for the centrality of the Enlightenment project in the negotiation of those crippling tensions in a glorious, but ultimately doomed, effort to articulate a set of arguments that would enable the West to put forward a comprehensive and practically viable set of moral rules. Along with many moral philosophers and cultural historians, MacIntyre knows that the Enlightenment's wager on the absolute sovereignty of Reason, and particularly Kant's deontological ethics, did serve determinate interests and particularly the interests of the middle-classes with their corporate and profit-oriented institutions and practices. In MacIntyre's view, the Enlightenment has failed in its attempt to reconcile what was structurally irreconcilable: the different worldviews and ideologies that were born out of a society whose economic and ideological organisation pitted one sector of society against the other in a relation of constant antagonism. The result, as he sees it, is that we have come to regard moral propositions not as propositions with a substantive content,



but as mere expressions of our private and ultimately philosophically unfounded emotions. The *emotivist self*, as he calls the modern individual in as far as ethics is concerned, having lost the benefit of a tightly-structured organic community similar to the ones prevalent in classical times and in Early Modern Europe and having also lost its faith in the Christian or any other theological dogma – traditionally the element that guaranteed a certain degree of ideological and social cohesion – now finds itself unable to defend its moral choices in any other way but by making implicitly or explicitly an appeal to its own will. For MacIntyre this essentially Nietzschean will that we all, in one way or the other, appeal to today is the last resort of a species that has lost its faith in the feasibility of grounding its concepts of good and evil in anything outside itself whether this may be the Kingdom of Heaven or the body politic. In MacIntyre's words "when shared belief in the *summum bonum* is lost, the question of the point and purpose of morality also becomes one for which answers have to be invented, and to which naturally enough rival and incompatible answers are given." (MacIntyre, 1983: 9). As a result, our politically and economically liberal societies are almost perfectly complemented by a plurality of values, themselves the unavoidable consequence of these very societies appearing more like aggregates of monadic individuals than political communities animated by a common purpose and common ideals.

The reason I have presented MacIntyre's views at this point is not only because I believe that they result in one of the best accounts of the evolution of moral thought from the antiquity to the present, but also because his unique historical reading of contemporary moral philosophy provides an excellent introduction to the more specialised issues addressed by ethical criticism in the twentieth-century. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre maintains that every "moral philosophy (...) characteristically presupposes a sociology" (MacIntyre, 1985: 23), meaning that it is futile to try to fully understand moral concepts as they evolve through time if the issue of their sociopolitical determination is not even considered. I would also add that every moral philosophy also presupposes a political economy although this particular

preoccupation is, according to existing bibliographical evidence, not very high in the interests of specialised researchers<sup>5</sup>.

#### POLITICS AND ETHICS: THE DIALECTICS OF POWER AND THE QUEST FOR THE GOOD

I would now like to discuss further the distinctly political nature of ethical discourse. I would like to start by saying that despite the attempts of certain contemporary theorists to politicise ethics<sup>6</sup>, I believe that these attempts partially fail to the extent that they all too often refuse to acknowledge the fact that ethical discourse has always been political, regardless of the fact that the official, normative discourses of our recent tradition have consistently tried to conceal this. I do understand that such attempts to politicise ethics may be construed as revealing a heightened sensitivity to the close relation of morality with politics – politics in its traditional guise or in its postmodern version as the politics of everyday life. Yet, I think that the best way to emphasize the political aspect of ethics, and ethical criticism in particular, is to affirm and foreground that which has always been evident and yet never fully perceived. Ethical discourse has always been profoundly political<sup>7</sup>, especially during those moments in history when it allowed itself the greatest distance from any explicit political discourse. Aristotle's ethics was profoundly political, the philosophical articulation of a mode of

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<sup>5</sup> It is however something that literature knows all too well. One of most poignant and funny instances of this is in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1916). In one scene (Act II) where Professor Pickering and Eliza's father quarrel over her fate we have the following exchange:

Pickering. Have you no morals, man?

Doolittle (unabashed) Can't afford them, Governor. Neither could you if you was as poor as me.

The moral/political critique that is implicit here is echoed in a much more politically explicit fashion in the excerpt that serve as the epigraph of this study.

<sup>6</sup> It has recently been argued that "one of the striking features of contemporary literary theory (...) is what might be termed its socio-politicisation of the ethical" (Coady & Miller, 1998: 201). See also Guillory, 2000 especially pp. 29-30 and, for a discussion of the same issue from a post-colonial perspective, Meffan & Worthington, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> One may find a reverse formulation of the same thesis, one that vies with postmodernism's specific preoccupation with the primacy of the ethical: "Politics has been a way in which, for a number of years, criticism has construed its own existence as a crucially ethical program" (Gibson, 1999: 4). My argument is that the acknowledgement of the non-reducibility of the *political* to the *ethical* is the necessary first step towards their dialectical synthesis. The problem is that not everybody gives the same interpretation to the concept of 'politics' and therefore the task of having an agreed upon definition of the 'political' is an issue of great importance that must be considered in advance of every discussion. I hope that what follows will clarify my conception of 'politics' in the context of this study and what it precisely entails in terms of methodology.

conduct fitting to the privileged members of a city-state, *mutatis mutandis* a proto-bourgeois philosophy; Kant's ethics also was profoundly political, the philosophical articulation of the sovereignty of Reason, the latter being the master-concept behind all the attempts of eighteenth-century bourgeoisie to formulate a coherent philosophical outlook; Hegel's ethics too was inherently political, reflecting his views on the modern state – in his case, unsurprisingly, the German state – as the culmination of Absolute Spirit's quest for perfection; so was the ethics of the English Empiricists, an ethics fashioned after the mercantilist ideology of the English ruling classes; the same holds for the Utilitarians and their logistics of moral values and for Nietzsche and his profoundly political rejection of any collectivist ideas along with all established views on morality and ethics and his legitimisation of an individualism free of all social constraints. One will hardly find an instance in the history of moral philosophy when ethics was not closely associated with the politics of its particular epoch.

It must be noted however that politics, as I use it here, is always in the sense of the politics of the dominant social classes; it always signifies the collective enterprise of establishing and maintaining political and economic power. However contradictory they may have been these politics have nevertheless been those of certain political and economic regimes. The same holds true for moral philosophy. Indeed one might say that moral philosophy has traditionally played the part of legitimising and providing a logically coherent set of rights, duties, and motives in the interest of the dominant ideology, of which it has always been part. This has traditionally been the generic, as it were, Marxist response to all issues pertaining to ethics or morality.<sup>8</sup> I, by and large, accept this view, but I also think that

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<sup>8</sup> There is, of course, a paradox in the case of Marxism which has fuelled a debate that has lasted for quite a long time. This paradox is that no matter how vehemently Marxism, especially in its Leninist variants, wishes to argue against the political validity of (mainly bourgeois) ethics in the form that it was bequeathed to us it often cannot avoid pronouncing its arguments in a manner that betrays the making of some fundamental moral choices (Marx always comes to mind at this point). One possible answer to that is that no one can escape his own historical determinations. Within our tradition, the moral code one aims to denounce for its mystificatory effect is so integral a part of the conceptual matrix of one's own consciousness that to argue against it is almost certainly to generate a contradiction. For a detailed discussion of the issues raised here see Lukes, 1985, Ash,

its strong version, i.e. the complete rejection of all things moral/ethical as irrelevant to Marxist theory or socialist politics is misguided since it refuses to acknowledge the profound, structural interrelatedness of ethics and politics in the sphere of social and political relations. So far I have argued for the close relation of moral philosophy and ideology, indeed for their co-articulation in the cultural matrix of history. I now wish to say more about the way in which ethics and politics are co-articulated in the social sphere.

If there is one thing that distinguishes moral philosophy from other forms of human inquiry it is its reliance on a specific trope, the 'good' vs. 'evil' binary opposition. According to Fredric Jameson "not metaphysics but ethics is the informing ideology of the binary opposition" (Jameson 1983: 114). Indeed ethics may be rightfully considered as a grand ideological gesture, whose function is to cement the disparate superstructural elements in a given order: "it is ethics itself which is the ideological vehicle and the legitimization of concrete structures of power and domination". (ibid, 114) Ethics, in its established form, provides the terrain where issues of power relations are transcodified and then expressed as issues of morality. Whenever those issues are articulated through the moral code the whole outlook undergoes a profound change. Whereas the political code allows for a kind of reasoning that may ultimately relate what is perceived as wrong or unjust with the actual world to its proper causes, the moral code, in my opinion, allows for no such thing. Instead it makes almost inevitable that all that is wrong or unjust will be attributed to either sin or moral deficiency. Ethics, as we know it from our Western tradition, certainly allows a certain degree of insight into the human condition. What it does not allow is this insight to be transformed into a knowledge that may eventually support a politics of effective resistance to the existing order. But is that necessary? Is that inherent in the moral code itself? The answer

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1998, Pfeffer, 1990 and McLellan & Sayers, 1990. A forceful justification of the Marxist objection to (bourgeois) ethics is to be found in Trotsky, 1973.

I would like to propose is not simple, nor does it exhaust all the possibilities. It is merely a first step towards a dialectical understanding of the relation between ethics and politics.

#### THE QUESTION OF IDEOLOGY

Before I embark on a detailed discussion of ethical criticism I wish to turn my attention to another concept which is important in the framework of this project, that of ideology. Since I do not intend to offer a full overview of all the epistemological and methodological problems that a detailed account of ideology entails, I will only attempt to make clear whatever is absolutely necessary for understanding its relevance to the current discussion. By ideology I designate any set of ideas, meanings, and values that are situated in the intersection of various discourses, political power, and human interests. This, however, is not enough. To make ideology a usable concept one needs to go one step further and draw attention to its specific characteristics, its distinctive features. Ideology, therefore, will also signify the social determination of thought in a manner that ultimately supports, actively or passively, the reproduction of any existing sociopolitical order. Yet, even this supplementary definition leaves certain questions unanswered. Is ideology to be only regarded as a specific mode of thought, one that works for the interests of a given social order or is it merely the unavoidable mode of constitution of all our thoughts? In short, can we escape ideology, and if not what is the usefulness of this concept as an analytical tool? Without embarking on an in-depth examination of the notoriously difficult problem of establishing a plausible and workable definition of truth, I shall nevertheless make an effort to clarify certain issues.

First and foremost, I think that the concept of ideology is a valid analytical tool because it enables one to make choices regarding the distinct political quality of a proposition (the thesis of ideology as politically complicit to regimes of differential power relations). In the following chapters where I will discuss the works of F. R. Leavis, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Lionel Trilling I shall have the opportunity to make practical use of the concept of 'ideology'

thus conceived. However, this must not be taken as implying that what is politically suspect or unacceptable is necessarily 'wrong'. It is rather to say that although "much of what ideologies say is true, and would be ineffectual if it were not..." they also "contain a good many propositions which are flagrantly false, and do so less because of some inherent quality than because of the distortions into which they are commonly forced in their attempts to ratify and legitimate unjust, oppressive political systems" (Eagleton 1991: 222). Ideology, as an analytical tool, is valid to the extent that one seeks to isolate those elements in any particular cultural artefact or discourse that lead to a political critique of the existing order, be it the political order or the order of theory. In seeing ideology as an essential part of literary or critical practice I rely on the fundamental Marxist premise that thought, theory, all manifestations of human consciousness are thoroughly historical, and thus deeply enmeshed in the politics of any given era. This means that, to me, no literary work of art or work of literary criticism should be treated as if it were something neutral, the product of a transcendently conceived individual consciousness, free from the tensions of history, since only within the framework of latter everything takes places and is appropriately signified. It is my view that any inquiry that erases history, either by refusing to acknowledge it or even by textualizing it *ad absurdum* makes our understanding of human life extremely problematic; firstly because it offers us an inadequate epistemology with which we can make sense of the way we comprehend the world; secondly, and more importantly, because it offers us nothing but the prospect of a very ineffectual politics.

However, there is still a question that must be answered. If ideology is to designate a discourse complicit with any form of power, then does not this entail that any critique of the latter, in order to be valid, must presuppose a somewhat privileged position within a non-ideological space, from which one may claim that one's own discourse is legitimate and true where other discourses are not? Is such a space possible? If such a space is conceived solely as a cognitive one then the notorious epistemological aporiae regarding the limits of human

cognition will almost certainly invalidate any critical argument unless of course one has been cautious enough to formulate a radically new philosophy that can allow for such a space. One way to read Western philosophy is precisely as an attempt to overcome the crippling realization that man can never be absolutely capable of transcending the limits of his limited, i.e. historically situated, consciousness. But the problem is precisely the positing of consciousness as the one organizing centre around which such problems may be resolved. What if the space we are looking for is not located in human consciousness but somewhere else? What if this space must be understood purely in relational terms, that is in accordance neither with a fundamental ontology of immutable presence, nor with a metaphysics of the incommensurability between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds but rather in accordance with its relative positionality in the multiple discursive and material formations in which it appears? In that case this space is best conceived of as dynamic and relational, an effect of a particular articulation of objective social relations and not of an a priori delimited human consciousness. But to what kind of social relations is one referring in this case? The answer I would like to propose is that it is relations of power, relations that presuppose an unequal distribution of (material and/or cultural) wealth, relations that those who are in possession of this wealth are constantly trying to legitimise and also reproduce. Therefore the space that one may occupy in order to apply any sort of *Ideologiekritik*<sup>9</sup> is not, I think, primarily an epistemologically but a politically defined one.

One of the main arguments put forth in these pages is that any kind of discourse (be it a discourse on ethics or a discourse on literature) is determined by the social, political, and material forces that shape its *historical present*. This determination, it must be said, is not something mechanical, not a mere cause that inescapably brings about certain effects, but

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Geuss' *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 26-44 presents the particular problems any criticism of ideology is bound to come up against with great lucidity and attention to detail.

rather something that works in a far more sophisticated way, the precise nature of which is not always clear or easily theorizable. Although the precise nature of this determination is a matter of contention, it will be sufficient to say once more that it is not a question of causal relations between the different levels of any given society, but rather a question of an extremely complex web of interrelating elements, where each such element is at one and the same time constitutive of and constituted by each other, and all in the last instance mobilised according to the logic proper to the dominant mode of production of the time.

Ethics, in this sense, is one of the main constitutive discourses of the historical societies as we know them, along with political economy, aesthetics, and metaphysics among others. As a distinct level of knowledge, ethics has its own features, its own vocabulary, and offers a specific view of human life. It is also – to the extent that it is constantly interacting with all the other elements – constantly revising its own concepts, broadening its traditional field of inquiry, asking new questions. However, this happens in accordance with a structural logic which is not made manifest by the sheer presence of quantifiable empirical evidence; it is rather the outcome of an interpretive process, I shall call, appropriating Paul Ricoeur's famous phrase, a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'; in other words, a politically-motivated hermeneutics.

What I have tried to do in this section is to establish that every discourse is bound up with the ensuing material and cultural inequalities that result from an asymmetrical distribution of power. By virtue of this very characteristic ethics and the discourse on morality are also ideologically motivated as is the case with any discourse which offers itself as a critique of these. I wish now to discuss in more detail the one discourse which is inspired by both ethics and literary criticism, namely ethical criticism.

#### ETHICAL CRITICISM: THE READING OF LITERATURE AS MORAL PEDAGOGY



The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only  
(for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise;  
it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of)  
the good life, since it *is* the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real.

Iris Murdoch<sup>10</sup>

Ethical criticism is the form that literary criticism takes when its concern for ethics and morality becomes prominent and is more or less explicitly articulated as such. Compared with any other concerns that literary criticism may have at any particular time, the concern over the ethical or moral quality of literature is what motivates the whole enterprise of ethical criticism. This particularly close relation between ethics and literature has occupied an important place in Western literary criticism, from classical antiquity to modern times. Even, in our century, as Tobin Siebers claims, “the character of the critic in modern literary theory is only and everywhere presented in ethical terms.” (Siebers 1988: 11).

Ethical criticism, especially in its current form, deals with all aspects of the literary phenomenon. That implies the totality of elements that constitute what we commonly refer to as literature: the element of literary production, the literary work itself, its moment(s) of consumption, and additionally, literature as an institution, and everything else that has a direct bearing on literature even if it does not properly belong to this field. Ethical criticism’s concern is to isolate those moments in that totality that are directly or indirectly related to ethics: the moral status of the individual work of art, the assignment of moral responsibility to the author and/or the reader<sup>11</sup>, the evaluation of the moral qualities of the fictional characters, often considered as entities personifying the dominant moral equalities of a

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<sup>10</sup> “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas & Alasdair MacIntyre, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> This is the only aspect that is relatively absent from contemporary academic ethical criticism. Critics engage with texts and are concerned about their moral effects in the context of their reception by the reading public. In addition to that, there is also the question of the tacit acceptance of the anti-intentionalist stance inaugurated by New Criticism. The attribution of moral worth or ethical responsibility to the producer of the text is something that risks conflating the categories of the critic on the one hand and the censor on the other and few ethical critics would want to appear endorsing such a conflation.

certain work of fiction, and last but not least the reading of literature in such a manner so as to support or contradict certain philosophical positions or arguments regarding moral conduct, or more generally, the pursuit of a moral life. In the latter case, ethical criticism seeks to interpret or simply reread literature as predominantly a testimony about the particular inscriptions of the notions of 'good' and 'evil' in the literary works under examination.

Ethical criticism, particularly in its recent incarnation, is diverse and its distinctiveness is due both to its methodology and to its object of inquiry. The method may assume the form of a direct approach to what we traditionally regard as the content of the literary work<sup>12</sup> (a feature of modernist criticism which is evident in the critical works of both Leavis and Trilling) or it may assume the form of a concern over the moral status of the act of reading, in the sense of identifying the moral effects something that potentially opens us to the world has on us<sup>13</sup>. It may also assume the form of a metacritical concern over the particular features of its own critical practice.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most debated issues in the philosophy of art and literary theory is the question of whether any criticism can be justified in its moral or political pronouncements given that the specific relation between art and human consciousness or society is notoriously contested. Ethical, as well as political, criticism has traditionally been the target of those who insisted that the artificiality of the fictional world precludes any unproblematic passage from textual to actual reality. Proponents and followers of the aesthetic dogma of art for art's sake deny that art, and literature in particular, can in any way serve as vehicles for moral truths.<sup>15</sup> Their argument is that a purely aesthetic entity, like a literary work of art, can

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Nussbaum, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Newton, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Such is the nature of the present study. See also Siebers, 1988 and Eaglestone, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this view see Possner, 1997 where, among other things, he claims that by "assigning to literature the function of promoting sound moral (including political) values, [the school of ethical critics] associates literature with public functions, such as the inculcation of civic virtue. By doing this it makes literature an inviting candidate for public regulation and thus contracts the private sphere. It goes far toward accepting the radicals' claim that everything is politics" (p. 8). This ultraliberal view seems to forget that literary

only give us a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. It does not give us any kind of knowledge upon which we could base any moral or political readings. The problem with this argument is that it assumes that the knowledge one acquires from engaging with a work of art is what philosophers call *procedural knowledge*, that is knowledge of how to do certain things. Although one cannot legitimately deny that literature may also occasionally provide this kind of knowledge the important objection to the above thesis is that the reading of literature provides us with *affective knowledge*, that is knowledge about feelings, values, and attitudes. This kind of knowledge is precisely what ethical criticism alludes to when its proponents claim that books often move us, something that implies moral sense, choice and eventually some sort of action.

From what I have said so far, it must be evident that ethical criticism, solely by its own practice, asserts that the literary text definitely relates productively to the extratextual reality, part of which, is, of course, the reader. The particular hermeneutical endeavour of ethical criticism and its underlying assumptions make the question of the relation between the ethical and the aesthetic a crucial one for its success. This inevitably brings me to the complex issue of the conjunction of aesthetics and ethics in literary criticism. As I discuss the interrelationship of the aesthetic and the ethical, I shall have the opportunity to also present and examine those aspects of classical philosophies that still play a decisive role in contemporary conceptions of ethics and literature. I shall attempt to do that by means of trying to establish the historical character, and, more importantly, the philosophical and ideological lineage, of the concepts one is likely to use in arguing persuasively either for or against what is currently the dominant mode of thinking. For the purposes of this short

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criticism begun its life as an essentially secularised form of Christian hermeneutics with the mission of improving the character and the general worldview of those disciplined by it (mainly civil servants and public-oriented individuals) and was therefore thoroughly and unambiguously associated with 'public functions' and 'civic virtue' For a most illuminating discussion of this pedagogical aspect of literary criticism see Hunter, 1988 & 1996.

survey, I shall only deal with those moments, the historical impact of which is very much in evidence in contemporary moral theory and ethical criticism in particular.

#### FROM PLATO TO NIETZSCHE: ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Plato was the first to provide a comprehensive account of the interrelationship of the two levels, with his insistence on their mutual dependency and the potential harm poets may inflict on the innocent souls of those prone to accepting the mimetic qualities of art at face value. He was the first critic to insist that the moral effect of any art is to be absolutely more crucial for its appreciation than any aesthetic quality it may possess. In this Plato, by being willing to allow entry to his ideal republic to the lyrical poet who would sing in praise of the gods and of the virtues of heroes and not to any other poet, is one of the key figures who inspires the sinister version of the ethical critic, namely the censor. Plato's open preference for propagandistic art is a constant reminder that ethical criticism in its normative guise may well be, among other things, the space where literary criticism and censorship converge. His pupil Aristotle proved far more sensitive to the aesthetic specificity of art. Aristotle's moral concept of catharsis which was first introduced in his *On the Art of Poetry* as the purgation of fear and pity which are the proper goals of a tragedy<sup>16</sup> is predicated on the ability of the playwright to use the most appropriate (aesthetic) means in pursuing this.

Whereas the Platonic conception of the connection between literary aesthetics and pedagogy is hardly a source of inspiration, the works of Aristotle, on the contrary, still inspire a large number of important philosophers especially in the field of ethics, and more particularly in the field of ethical criticism. The reason for this is that Aristotle's ethical theory was able to provide, albeit in a modified form, a conceptual and ideological framework that corresponded well to certain of the fundamental aspirations of philosophers in modern times. Aristotle's immense contribution was that he established a strong link

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<sup>16</sup> In Aristotle, 1965: 39 (chapter 6).

between rationality and ethics, a link that has not been irreparably severed even in our own time, a time notoriously suspicious, at least in some quarters, of the idea of rationality. This Aristotelian rationality is an integral part of the social fabric of the ancient polis. It is also a particular mode of thinking and acting, which enables men to reach their goal within the framework of a community. This is a conception of morality as something entirely constituted in a social space in direct and unbreakable relation with the governance of the polis; it is therefore thoroughly political. The key regulating concept here is *eudaimonia*: the well-being, a good citizen, and not an abstractly conceived individual, is worthy of. However, it is with this concept that Aristotle's conservative political outlook comes to the foreground. The good life, the result of virtue, of rational moral choice, is above all the advantage of a small elite minority, of which Aristotle considered himself to be a member. This aristocratic minority, the only one ultimately capable of philosophical contemplation, far away as possible from any pressing material necessity, was Aristotle's assumed audience. This feature that marks Aristotle's thought, this tension between his conceptual brilliance and his political conservatism is also, implicitly or explicitly, a point of tension in a great deal of neo-Aristotelian thought.<sup>17</sup>

Three centuries later Horace, following Aristotle's general moral and aesthetic guidelines, claimed that "poets aim at giving either profit or delight, or at combining the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life" (Horace, 1965: 90). This principle that emphasized the conjunction of the *utile* (moral profit) with the *dulce* (aesthetic delight) along with his (inherently ethical) principle of decorum (or dramatic propriety) survived, in one way or another, to our own times although now the dominant paradigms in art and literary criticism are markedly different. Of these the Kantian paradigm is of singular importance for my discussion here.

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<sup>17</sup> Virtually every liberal conception of ethics – and not only Neo-Aristotelianism – is greatly indebted to the Aristotelian conception of morality and therefore the tensions I am alluding to are to found in these articulations as well, as I shall have the opportunity to show when I discuss Leavis's and Trilling's work.

Kant is largely responsible for the rigorous separation of ethics and aesthetics, the former being the realm of practical reason and the latter of judgement. However, when he comes to the discussion of the celebrated concept of the sublime Kant claims that it has its foundation in human nature and more specifically in “the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to moral feeling” (Kant, 1987: 125), thus making it a meeting point of the aesthetic and the ethical where both are mediated by culture. As his following statement clearly indicates: “it is a fact that what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas” (ibid, 124). What we see here is not only that the aesthetic category of the sublime is culturally determined but also that a consciousness ‘lacking in moral ideas’, that is one which is poorly socialised though education, is incapable of appreciating it. Thus Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*, with the additional help of the concept of *sensus communis*, relates the ethical and the aesthetic with each other, by binding both to the underlying cultural and social structures.

Kant’s influence is more than evident in moral philosophy but less so in contemporary ethical criticism. Kantian formalism especially in his formulation of the categorical imperative – the cornerstone of Kantian ethics – makes his work rather unsuitable as a conceptual foundation to a critical practice which deals with the fictionalised form of the specifics of human life. Kantian ideas are very much in evidence in nineteenth-century criticism, particularly in Hazlitt and Coleridge (through A. W. Schlegel) and later on the Victorian critics, but as we move to the next century these ideas seem to be all the more inadequate for dealing with the pressing issues that literary criticism came up against. The modernist provocation, the post-World War II situation and other world-historical events all contributed greatly to the relative devaluation of a philosophical approach that gave absolute priority to Reason and hardly ever took into account the contingencies of human life and history, not to mention the material necessities underlying these. How could it be different

since Kant's ethics was initially articulated as the ideal companion to the exigencies of the yet relatively unstructured capitalist market? It aimed at providing it with a set of rules and restrictions, which would enable it to overcome one of its most urgent moral paradoxes: the search for a viable moral system which could satisfy the need of providing individuals with a strong motive for not allowing their self-interest to overcome certain limits. The problem, of course, was that this unimpeded self-interest was considered as the main guarantee for the non-problematic function of the market itself. Kant's ethics of duty as dictated by formal reason alone was the futile attempt to provide an answer to a historically justified, but politically suspect question, because instead of promoting what the liberal Kant assumed as historically feasible it merely served as a "framework of justice necessary for [the] commercial society" (Poole 1991: 20) of his own time. His ethics of duty, in sharp contradistinction to the Aristotelian ethics of virtue, which I discussed above, attempted to formalize what was essential for the newly formed identity of the individual in the Western world. Something that could no longer be formalized in terms of an ethics of virtue, since such an ethics could not be pursued in a society that was in the process of destroying the very foundations this particular conception of ethics depended upon. As a consequence of this, Kantian ideas came to be regarded with hostility by left-wing theorists and postmodernists alike and if they survive in ethical criticism they only survive as parts of the conceptual background of certain critical approaches that seem to find no incompatibility between the 'thick' descriptions of life in literature and the 'thin' and often overtly formalistic descriptions of a philosophical approach of which the injunction to comply with the rule of a transhistorical Reason is the fundamental characteristic.

It would be Nietzsche, a century later, who would attempt to debunk this rational ethics by arguing that it was nothing more than a variation of the ethics of resentment which, according to him, was the legacy of Judeo-Christianity. For Nietzsche, Kantian as well as other moral theories inherited the whole tradition of Christian thought and, instead of doing

away completely with the false metaphysical assumptions of that thought, they merely substituted a secular metaphysics of rational duty for the holy metaphysics of duty before God. Nietzsche's project was to reach the limits of this situation and go beyond it: beyond good and evil. The transcendence of the slave morality, which was the outcome of the particular outlook of the weak and the helpless with the sole purpose of reversing the power relations that have kept them in check throughout history was, for Nietzsche, the sole duty of the *Übermensch*, the overman, the gifted, free spirit that would affirm his vitality and natural instincts without any moral inhibition or social constraint. In doing so, in going beyond good and evil the overman would be constrained not by an ethics but by an aesthetics of life.

Nietzsche's views reflected modernity's malcontent, the gradual realization of the limits of Reason, the premonition of the imminent disaster. His philosophy was indeed in many aspects prophetic, and in many others an empty excess, but admittedly a most powerful one. His ideas may not have influenced a distinct school of ethical criticism, but their importance lies elsewhere. It lies in their pervasiveness in almost all aspects of twentieth-century critical thought and in the way they influenced positively or negatively anyone who would tackle the thorny problem of morality in the context of twentieth-century history. His views about the relation of language and history, namely that we are only dealing with linguistic or ideological (mis)interpretations and not with facts, his emphasis on the question of power and particularly his insistence that morality and ethical systems in general come to exist as social phenomena only as an aspect of the struggle for the acquisition of power have left a strong mark on contemporary theory and moral philosophy in particular. Much closer to my own preoccupations here, his unique conception of the liberating and often destructive power of the human will would later influence both Sartre and Trilling in the ways they conceived of certain issues essential to ethics and the moral examination of literature in particular.

What I have presented so far are those philosophers who are, without a doubt, among the most important ones in helping us understand the specific character of moral philosophy,



and by extension, of morally-inflected or ethical criticism during the twentieth century. But however important and vital to our understanding these thinkers may be, one has to acknowledge the fact that their influence in literary criticism was by and large mediated by the works of those who, while not professional philosophers, did nevertheless look to philosophy for either inspiration for their theoretical and critical formulations or, quite often, as a means to legitimise *post facto* their ideas and propositions. This other genealogical line, the tradition of literary criticism, is of particular importance, one that can hardly be underestimated in my discussion here. To this I shall now turn to my attention.

#### COMPLEMENTING PHILOSOPHY: THE TRADITION OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Taking as a starting point the fact that literary criticism in its modern sense first appears as a discursive formation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries one can immediately observe one of its main historical characteristics, namely that it was, among other things, the product of the ideological struggle of the rising bourgeois class against the obscurantist ideology of the absolutist state. As Terry Eagleton says, during that time “the European bourgeoisie begins to carve out for itself a distinct discursive space, one of rational judgement and enlightened critique rather than of the brutal ukases of an authoritarian politics” (Eagleton 1984: 9). It is within this discursive space that literary criticism is first practised; impressionistic, ad hoc and often belletristic, but nevertheless a novel practical-ideological gesture, which asserts the will and intention of the bourgeois class in its revolutionary period to produce a new discourse, to participate in a new cultural formation that may eventually be shared by all free citizens who are guided by Reason. The moral imperative of such a discourse was from the moment of its insertion into the fabric of history one of its most distinctive features: in order to be able to participate in this newly-formed public sphere one had to be able to share with the other members this new interpretive code, which was claimed to be based on Reason and good faith. Not to be able

to do so was not merely an inadequacy, but a more deep-rooted deficiency. In other words, it signified a more fundamental lack than the ignorance of a specialized subject did. Those who were excluded from such a discourse were to be regarded as lacking something far more vital than merely technical information.

We can see this politics of sedimentation, on the one hand, and exclusion, on the other, to feature again and again in the history of criticism. From the time of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* in the beginning of the eighteenth century to the *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review* almost a century later literary criticism progresses from being initially a gentleman's worthy pursuit to becoming a recognised and relatively autonomous literary genre. With the transition from the essentially positive critique of the Augustan period (affirmation of the bourgeois values) to the negative critique of the Romantic period (affirmation of the transcendental creative spirit in stark opposition to the professionalization of literature and the philistinism of the market) literary criticism finds itself in a situation where its aesthetic and moral pronouncements assume an ever more pronounced political inflection. Criticism becomes even more explicitly political during this time by engaging with history in a twofold manner: by selective engagement with the political situation of the time, while, at the same time, denying any intrinsic relation of literature with the 'impure world' of politics. This act of isolating the realm of letters from the realm of the ever-expanding capitalist market and of real-life politics, this ideological manoeuvre par excellence, has left a lasting effect on the way we would from then on deal with literature, particularly as regarding its relation with anything that falls outside its own (idealistically conceived) realm.

Later on during the Victorian period we find one of the most important cultural critics, whose work would have a long lasting effect on Anglo-American criticism from then on: Matthew Arnold. In the context of this study, Arnold is far more important than any other critic since it is in his work that the relation between morality and politics finds one of its more exemplary formulations and additionally because, without him, neither Leavis nor

Trilling would turn out to be the kind of critics they eventually became. Arnold's criticism may be characterized by many things but one that stands out is, according to Eagleton<sup>18</sup>, his preoccupation to find a substitute for traditional religion, a new dogma that could contain and regulate the sociopolitical tensions, enhance and safeguard the social and ideological cohesion of his society and finally hope to succeed where other traditional ideological formations have failed. Arnold gave his new dogma the name of Culture; an all-encompassing concept that not only superseded all previous conceptualisations of the same aspect of reality, but also initiated a way of cultural criticism that used these concepts as political weapons in the struggle of middle-class intellectuals to articulate a socially effective discourse both in relation to their own class and the other classes with which they had uneasy or adversarial relations. Arnold's polemical intervention stands out for precisely its political nature and for its own peculiar way of articulating its pronouncements. If one considers the following extract from *Culture and Anarchy*:

This is the *social ideal*, and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, from carrying from one end to society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the *best* knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore of sweetness and light (Arnold 1960: 70).

one may, applying a charitable interpretation, read it as an exemplary idealist text, a typical product of the British nineteenth century, a text which, although vague and strategically non-specific, does not so easily allow itself to be read as a biased, ideologically charged, political intervention. It is, however, in its own context that its true character is revealed:

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<sup>18</sup> In Eagleton: 2000 and also in Parrinder: 1991: 143-178.

So whatever brings risk of tumult and disorder, multitudinous precessions in the streets of our crowded towns, multitudinous meetings in their public places and parks, - demonstrations perfectly unnecessary in the present course of our affairs, - our best self, or right reason, plainly enjoins us to set our faces against. It enjoins us to encourage and uphold the occupants of the executive power, whoever they may be, in firmly prohibiting them. (Arnold 1960: 97).

Arnold's class politics become evident whenever his own text fails to contain and resolve all the contradictions of the society it is referring to and thus attempts to exorcise this failure by means of a dubious rhetoric: "our best self...", and since some might be excused for wondering what does this best self really consist of, Arnold adds "..., or right reason" so that his readers could be reassured that it is a matter of a particular kind of social order, one that is guided by something infinitely more stable and (morally) legitimate than class politics alone. So, the humanization of the masses can happen only as long as they are kept in check (in the name of a suprahistorical Reason), which means as long as the working class keeps producing enough surplus value for Arnold, and by extension for his entire class, to be in a position to devote their time in discussing the translations of Homer and the relative cultural merits of Hellenism and Hebraism.

The intellectual, at once a public servant and a self-appointed prophet, is the one who regulates the distribution of cultural goods allocating a fixed amount to each class, according to the latter's social function and ideologically conceived 'destiny'. As a consequence of that, the Philistines (the middle-class), Arnold's own social peers, are to be educated by a state-sanctioned elite so that they may secure an ideological hegemony that can guarantee the continuation of their privileges over the Populace (the working class) which stands against them ready to disrupt the imposed order. What is novel in such a discourse is not its political motivation but its mode of enunciation. Arnold's high moralistic tone is, apart from being one of the most characteristic features of his discourse, a tactical move that attempts to focus

the reader's attention not on the real issues in question but on an interpretation based on a moral code that is presented in such an elusive manner so as to produce an exceptionally vague and circular type of argument, one that will initiate a very influential tradition of moral (or morally-inflected) criticism in the English world such as F. R. and Q. D. Leavis's, Orwell's, Trilling's and later on some of R. Hoggart's critical works. Arnold's Victorian heritage will be left to the aforementioned critics and to a wider community of critics in the English-speaking world to negotiate in accordance with the historical logic of the twentieth century and the pressing ideological and political necessities that this century brought with it.

Arnold along with the critics who I have just mentioned have all produced a body of work, within the framework of which certain ideas and theories regarding ethics and criticism still exert a very strong influence on current literary theory. However, this presentation is far less than adequate for any proper understanding of the intellectual heritage that twentieth century critics inherited from the past. One could legitimately object to the omission of many philosophers and literary critics like Hegel and Coleridge or Carlyle, not to mention the omission of the English empiricists, the Utilitarian tradition and J. S. Mill and the other less well-known philosophers and thinkers whose historical fate was not that glorious. But, I can only defend my choices here by saying that I only wished to present those that have a direct, undeniably important influence on contemporary ethical criticism at least in the English-speaking academia and not to offer a comprehensive survey of moral philosophy or literary criticism prior to the twentieth century.

#### THE TURN TOWARDS THE ETHICAL CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

To speak about the relation of literature with ethics and morality is not something entirely new, although it is only recently that this particular critical practice has succeeded in voicing its concerns in such a manner so as to make itself an identifiable and distinctive way of theorising literature. It is only recently that an explicitly self-conscious ethical criticism

attracted so much attention, so much in fact that it was thought to signify a 'turn toward the ethical' in literary theory<sup>19</sup>. This was no accident and there are historical reasons for that. In discussing these reasons I would like to present the broader ideological context of the last forty years and then attempt to identify the historical specificity of the last decade of the twentieth century.

From the sixties onwards the two main critical schools opposed to the prevalent liberal humanist critical practice were a) neo-Marxist literary theory, mainly Althusserian in inspiration, on the one hand; and b) post-structuralism, and particularly deconstruction, on the other. With a cultural formation such as this the conceptual space necessary for the legitimate inclusion of ethics into literary theory was simply not there. What is more, in the rare cases when there was any mention of the *ethical* in conjunction with the *literary*, the verdict was not in favour of the former. But what exactly was so discredited? Many things, to be sure, but it was liberal humanism, the main and most fundamental ideology and basic interpretative matrix of Western bourgeois culture that was to be the primary target of both the aforementioned critical practices.

From a Marxist viewpoint it was increasingly evident that liberal humanism was the ever-reliable device of bourgeois ideological mystification, in the sense that what it did in fact do was to conceal the glaring contradictions of the present by continually shifting the emphasis from the actual problems and their effective causes and effects to the ideological mystification of 'good' versus 'evil', 'moral responsibility' versus 'moral apathy' or viciousness. Instead of providing an alternative way of thinking that would take into account the material causes of a disastrous global state of affairs, insupportable by a growing number of people, what was offered was the escape route of conceptualising both the problem and its effective solution in terms of a moral struggle to overcome the quasi-metaphysical evil that has befallen humankind. So instead of enabling a higher understanding which might in

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<sup>19</sup> According to David Parker it is during the nineties that a certain 'turn to ethics' in literary criticism became so apparent as to merit a consideration as a critical subgenre. For more details see Parker, 1998.

turn lead to a transformation of the situation at hand, liberal humanism persisted in its mystificatory rhetoric at times when there evidently was a great need for an alternative way of thinking and theorising the present.

Another response to that came from post-structuralism, a critical practice that was largely due to the influence of Nietzsche and Saussure through a rigorous re-reading of them by a number of French theorists, who shared, among other things, certain important assumptions about the nature of 'our' common conceptual and ideological heritage. One of these assumptions was that liberal humanism was, despite its pretensions to the contrary, nothing more than an ideological *trompe l'œil*, an arbitrary, though hardly unjustified, attempt at naturalising and universalising a historically specific way of thinking man and society and their interrelationship. By assuming a hard inalienable core of subjectivity, by attributing intentions and holding men accountable for their works and actions, this 'grand narrative', to use François Lyotard's famous expression, paved the way to a society, which from then on would conceive itself along these lines, unable to see, and of course act upon, any other alternative line of thinking. To the poststructuralists this accounted for the inability to conceptualise anything that would not presuppose an emphatically unitary, sovereign individual who stands whole, as it were, facing and dealing with an equally tightly structured society.

Another point of contention was literature itself. In contradistinction to Marxism, which by and large considered literature as directly related to the material basis of society, post-structuralism regarded literature as a self-enclosed body of texts in which any reference to extratextual reality did not point or lead us to that reality but rather constituted it within literature's own textual space. In short, literature's fictionality was considered as exemplifying the assumed textual/fictional character of history. This feature of poststructuralist thought, archetypically formulated in the critical work of R. Barthes from the mid-sixties onwards marks one of the most fundamental differences between it and Marxism: the different

epistemologies at work in their respective interpretations. Resolutely realist<sup>20</sup> in the case of Marxism, ambivalently anti-realist in the case of post-structuralism, the respective epistemology of each prevented them from achieving anything more than a problematical co-existence in the sphere of critical and literary theory.

This double rejection of liberal humanism and all the values which were associated with it left little room for ethics in the more conventional sense, since ethics had come to be considered as a very suspect notion, if not an outrageous ideological lie and utterly complicit with an increasingly obsolescent humanist discourse. That is not to say that all questions about ethics ceased to be articulated. On the contrary, what actually did happen was that these questions were then asked as part of a larger framework of reference where the quasi-metaphysical, almost sacred autonomy of the ethical (a major feature of almost all bourgeois thought about ethics) simply ceased to exert any normative influence. Within this new framework of reference, where issues of epistemological and political validity set the tone for a radical re-examination and re-appraisal of Western tradition, the ethical question underwent an equally radical transformation. The ethical sphere, once the undeniable repository of bourgeois ideological hegemony, became a strongly contested space, fraught with discrepancies and insoluble contradictions. Liberal humanism – having persisted in spite of the most horrifying historical evidence against it (the ghosts of the Nazi concentration camps, among other things, which once prompted Theodor Adorno to wonder whether there could be any lyrical poetry, and by extension politically naïve art, after Auschwitz) – ended up, at least in the realm of theory, having to defend itself. The hermeneutics of suspicion inaugurated by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud became the tools which were used in order to extract from their object not the hidden truth but the manifest lie, not an immutable

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<sup>20</sup> Needless to say realism even within Marxism comes in all sizes and flavours. For my purposes here I shall only emphasize the fact that I am talking about a philosophy that accepts that reality is independent of our understanding of it.



essence but an index of concrete historical instances, not personal disinterestedness but historical complicity.

Having presented the ideological background, even in such a sketchy manner, it is now possible to put the current debate in its wider historical context. The emergence of 'ethical criticism' as an identifiable critical subgenre is, as I have indicated above, largely a phenomenon of the last decade (1990s). In my view, the most important historical reason for this emergence was the new political and ideological configuration of the world-system after the collapse of the vast majority of Communist regimes and the seemingly unchallenged hegemony of liberal democracy and free-market economics. One of the results of this world-historical shift was a profound change in the tenor of the ideological warfare between the Right and the Left. Whereas the latter was left in the least enviable position of trying to refashion itself in a rapidly changing world while at the same time failing to come up with anything even barely resembling a consensual appraisal of why things turned out the way they did, the former felt justified in engaging in a series of often self-congratulatory assertions about the current hegemonic status of liberal ideas. All the arguments put forth during the first years of the 1990s shared one common theme: the inherent deficiency of the socialist/Marxist paradigm and the seemingly incontestable superiority of the liberal paradigm, which, in their view, was the one that conformed the best with the needs and aspirations of the vast majority of people. In this atmosphere of unbridled optimism for the prospect of an unchallenged liberal, capitalist future there appeared the possibility of conceptualising this state of affairs not simply as the aftermath of a political and ideological victory but as the beginning of a new period where political and ideological oppositions of any consequence will have no reasons for emerging. The argument was that with the dominance of a single political and economic paradigm all opposition would, from then on, be confined within the very narrow framework of deciding for or against specific issues, mostly technical in nature and which would not threaten the system itself. This came to be

known as the end-of-history thesis since in Francis Fukuyama's work<sup>21</sup> where it first made its appearance<sup>22</sup> the whole series of arguments is structured around the rather implausible assertion that we have reached the end of history, or in other words the end of a long era during which profound ideological differences could cause wide-scale disruptions in the normal working of the global (capitalist) system. If, according to this line of argument, we have entered a new period when fundamental ideological differences have become either a thing of the past or a feature of marginalised and politically neutralised sectors of Western societies then it is understandable why, during the same time, a new discourse made its appearance.

This discourse was moral in its form but implicitly political in its content. According to it all our fundamental differences are to be dealt with in moral and not political terms, or as Fredric Jameson argues, within the framework of "systems of idealism that turn events first into ideas before producing what look like iron-clad explanations but what are in fact rewarmed rehashings of our old friends Good and Evil." (Jameson, 1991: 262). If, so the claim goes, ideologies are dead then any oppositional attitude or practice must find its ultimate justification in the realm of ethics and not politics. It is this wider political and ideological context that, in my view, facilitated the emergence of contemporary ethical criticism. From that point onwards, it would be this new critical idiom that ought to articulate the critical, oppositional ideas in the place left vacant by the Marxist and poststructuralist theories of the previous periods.

Contemporary ethical criticism is a critical idiom that has very little of substance to say about the political implications of the aspects of literature it examines. All political questions are transcoded into ethical or moral questions and the outer conceptual limits of its critical practice are those put in place by ethics in its traditional or postmodern variant. In order to

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<sup>21</sup> Fukuyama's ideas first appeared in the article "The End of History", *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, pp. 3-118 and then in a more expanded form in Fukuyama, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Or rather its re-appearance. For a detailed and highly informative historical account of the school of thought that found its most recent expression in Fukuyama see Anderson, 1992.

support these assertions, I wish to examine more closely the two dominant paradigms in contemporary ethical criticism. These are Neo-Aristotelianism and Levinasian ethics, the former having originated in the English-speaking world and the latter in France.

#### THE NEO-ARISTOTELIANS: LITERATURE AND THE GOOD LIFE

The work of the Neo-Aristotelian school, of which Martha Nussbaum and MacIntyre are two of the most prominent members, has been hugely influential and instrumental in providing much of the theoretical support needed for a certain version of contemporary ethical criticism. This particular ethical criticism, often practised by philosophers themselves, is a testimony to a relatively recent trend particularly among Neo-Aristotelians to consider literature as the ideal vehicle for a certain ethical conception of the human adventure, one that is qualitatively superior to the established analytical and often dry tone of traditional philosophy. The characteristics of this particular neo-Aristotelian outlook, especially in ethical criticism, an outlook, which draws its inspiration from the whole of Aristotelian philosophy and not just its ethics, may be summarised as follows: a) the noncommensurability of the valuable things, b) the priority of perceptions (priority of the particulars), c) ethical values of the emotions, and d) ethical relevance of uncontrolled happenings. This enumeration of characteristics taken directly from Martha Nussbaum's book *Love's Knowledge* (pp. 35-44) is indicative of the range and the preferred themes of this school of thought: the emphasis on particularity, the prioritisation of the affective, and the positive valuation of contingency. Thus literature is seen as something which offers us, as Robert Eaglestone claims, the "experience through which our ethical intuitions and moral outlines can be tested, explored and modified" (Eaglestone 1997: 39). It is easy to see why this type of criticism is particularly drawn to the examination of moral issues. Literature, by providing a thick description of human affairs, enables the attentive reader to experience a kind of a simulation of life, another life whose intricate particularities the reader ideally treats

as a form of moral education, that is a sort of education which, again ideally, would lead him to pursue a better life for himself. In other words, as T. J. Diffey argues: “if a reader's concern for literature is serious, he must be responsible in action. Otherwise literature is merely an indulgence.” (Diffey, 1975: 448).

There is a certain ideological naivety that characterizes such views. The reasons are many but one of them is certainly that they seem to be unaware of the quite complex problems that any passage from a textual world to a real one entails.<sup>23</sup> Both analytic philosophers and poststructuralists have long claimed, each camp pursuing its own philosophical agenda, that the textual structure of a literary work of art prevents it from being the most reliable instrument in the moral education of humankind<sup>24</sup>. Yet, apart from the epistemological problems that arise due to the Neo-Aristotelians conviction of the essential transparency of texts<sup>25</sup> there is another characteristic of Neo-Aristotelian criticism that poses even more problems. This is its latent elitism, something that is also thoroughly constitutive of Aristotle's own political thought. A criticism of this kind tacitly presupposes a privileged status in the community one belongs to, a certain form of identity that the critic assumes and which is accepted rather uncritically without examining the terms of its existence. Not many Neo-Aristotelians seem to wonder as to whether there are any externally imposed limits to the access people have to (great) literature. Not only that but they also seem to pass in silence the thorny issue of whether the moral training by a rigorous regime of reading literature is applicable in any large scale, given that for the vast majority of people the reading of literature does not figure very high in their priorities. In other words to assume such a beneficent role for literature while remaining blind to the material restrictions that conspire to exclude the bulk of humankind of such lofty pursuits is something that, in my opinion,

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<sup>23</sup> A very informative discussion of the epistemological and other issues that arise when one reads ‘ethically’ or in any other fashion is to be found in Diamond, 1983.

<sup>24</sup> A comprehensive introduction to the philosophical problems any ethical criticism runs up against is to be found in Carroll, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> A detailed and often interesting discussion of this issue from a Neo-Aristotelian perspective is to be found in Booth, 1988, especially part II.

seriously undermines the otherwise constructive propositions of this kind of criticism. This Aristotelian conception of ethics and literature which revolves around the organising concept of 'virtue' and which tacitly assumes an 'organic', democratically-controlled society<sup>26</sup> with a clear and unambiguous conception of the highest good is an often unacknowledged premise of a great deal of modernist ethical criticism. The work of both F. R Leavis and Lionel Trilling which will be discussed in the next chapters may be read as cases in point.<sup>27</sup>

#### LEVINAS AND THE ETHICS OF ALTERITY

Apart from the Neo-Aristotelians and in contradistinction to them the other most decisive influence of contemporary ethical criticism comes from the work of Emmanuel Levinas. His is a philosophical theory that provides the basis of much of contemporary research in ethical criticism, especially the kind of criticism that focuses on the moral quality of the very act of reading literature, something that to many critics is essentially an expression of the *rapprochement* with the Other, a theme Levinas' philosophy is so much concerned about.

Levinas' work started as an elaboration on Husserlian and Heideggerian themes and was gradually transformed to a most uncompromising moral philosophy, one whose primary concern became the establishing of ethics as first philosophy. By that I mean that Levinas set out to argue for the irreducibility of the ethical, the "primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest" (Levinas 1991: 79). This first structure that underlies our being-in-the-world is best described as the mode of being that is already-there before any form of interaction with others, or indeed any form of existence, takes place. We are, for Levinas, in the realm of the ethical before we ever enter the realm of language and

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<sup>26</sup> I am speaking here of an assumption made by the theory. In truth, the concrete historical reality Aristotle referred to and which he accepted without any scruples or sense of self-contradiction was one in which women, slaves and metics (resident aliens of each city-state) were excluded from the democratic process and were deemed unable to pursue the highest forms of life. Although that does not invalidate the main tenets of his theory it does show the inability of any philosophy to transcend the ideological and ultimately material conditions of its existence.

<sup>27</sup> Sartre as well although, at least from the sixties onwards, from the opposite side.

signification. This is best expressed by the notions of the 'face' and the 'Other'. By claiming that "to see the face is to speak to the world" and that "transcendence is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture" (Levinas 1991: 174), Levinas dismisses representation as an act of violence directed against the fundamental inviolability of the Other. One is supposed to speak the world but not to represent it, since to represent is at one and the same time to dominate, to harm, to disturb, to impose a totalitarian order on it. Levinas's notion of the other, as radical alterity, is irreducible to whatever our conceptual framework provides for. For him, philosophy is called upon to remedy that inadequacy, to salvage the non-representability, the *sine qua non* of radical ethicalness of the Other by nevertheless utilising the same means that enacted that betrayal: language. This paradox is constitutive of Levinas' work and it is of great importance to his philosophy's application in postmodern ethics and ethical criticism.

Levinas' philosophy is an attempt to formulate an ethical theory, which will be conceptually rigid enough in its basic presuppositions to sustain the pressure from the moral scepticism that marks out modernity's notorious ambiguity towards the questions of ethics. His demand for an understanding of the absolute priority and irreducible essence of the ethical has inspired many postmodern intellectuals and literary theorists. This has led to a significant number of works that attempt to provide an alternative ethical criticism, one that is not a mere reformulation of the themes prevalent in a more traditional ethical criticism, but rather one that reads literary works as expressions of the fundamental paradox that facing the Other poses for our moral understanding.<sup>28</sup>

Levinas' work is not, as I have already pointed out, the only philosophical foundation of current ethical criticism, but it is by far the most influential. Postmodern ethical criticism has found a powerful ally in its relentless attack against the 'dubious ontology' presupposed in

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<sup>28</sup> In this respect Newton (1995) and Eaglestone (1997) are, from the point of view of literary theory, very instructive and informative. For an appraisal from the point of view of a wider critical framework Critchley (1992) and Baumann (1993) are just as good.

classical criticism, an ontology, which is the essential foundation of Western philosophy; in Derridean terms, an ontology of presence, essence, self-sameness, and *telos*. The antifoundationalist, antimetaphysical urge of postmodern theory thus finds an ethical philosophy to complement it, a philosophy so rigorously opposed to any teleology or totalising gestures.<sup>29</sup> Yet this philosophy that posits the absolute priority of ethics can only achieve its aim at the expense of the social character of the latter. Despite the avowed intention of many critics influenced by Levinas to touch upon politically sensitive issues, ethics in its Levinasian sense is constantly drawn back to the barely intelligible realm of primordial (pre-social and ahistorical) contact with the Other. I have serious doubts as to whether such a notion can contribute to any substantial political conception of ethics, and consequently of any ethical criticism that will not seek to avoid the engagement with the real ‘other’, both in the micropolitics of everyday life and the macropolitics of the global capitalist market.<sup>30</sup> Levinas’s ethics seems uncomfortable with history and the ethical criticism that finds its inspiration in his work is equally uninterested in examining the historical and political determinations of ethical issues. I shall now attempt to give my own views regarding these issues.

#### MORALITY AND HISTORY: AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF READING ETHICAL CRITICISM

In this concluding section I would like to put forward my own views regarding the specific problems that ethical criticism comes up against and additionally propose a possible way of dealing with these. I shall start by appropriating a phrase, which opens Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*: “always historicize!” This “one absolute (...) and “transhistorical” imperative of all dialectical thought” (Jameson 1983: 9) is also the guiding

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<sup>29</sup> The result is that an ethical criticism inspired by Levinas sees cognition and representation, each relating to (modernist) criticism and fiction respectively as “an exertion of violence (...) a denial of the independence of the existents” (Gibson, 1999: 57). This implicit rejection of a modernist criticism has some very worrying political implications which I shall have the opportunity to discuss in the following section of this chapter.

<sup>30</sup> Some of the problems that Levinas’s own theory faces when it is confronted by actual historical events are discussed in Caygill (2002).

imperative of my own method. Historicize: return to history what has been taken away from it. Return something not because one has a moral obligation to return a loan but because one cannot but accept the necessity to acknowledge the foundation of one's thoughts and actions, and – and this is most crucial – their outer limit. History, as I understand it, gives us more than a convenient context: it gives us the ground of the whole structure of the social character of our being, the systemic totality that enables any movement, any change and any action. It is the fabric of time and the lived experiences of humankind during this vast, historical time. But history is also profoundly material. It is the product not of a metaphysically conceived time that merely passes by and thus constitutes it, but of productive human labour, of human praxis. This latter element of praxis is crucial to my problematic. I hold that all creative work, all work that transforms inert matter into manageable, usable artefacts is profoundly historical, in the sense that it is history that provides the key to unlock its otherwise paradoxical occurrence in time, its stubborn existence, its often unjustifiable effects. We make history, yet without history we would not be able to make anything. So, since history is the driving force behind everything that finds a place, however small, in our culture, it must therefore be best understood as a key element of the political unconscious<sup>31</sup> of any text or theory.

Yet, I think that the above argument is not enough. Any methodology that draws its main inspiration from Marxism, as does mine, should not merely aspire to be an enlightened historicism; nor should it be content just with putting forward the thesis that all things are structurally interdependent within the all-encompassing system of human history. For such a theory or interpretive model a complementary thesis is essential: all history is the history of a constant antagonism between those who have misappropriated the best part of the others' products of labour and those who are forced to sell the products of their labour or

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<sup>31</sup> I am using Fredrik Jameson's phrase 'political unconscious' in order to designate what he describes as the "ground and untranscendable horizon" of humankind, one that "needs no particular justification" since "we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them" (Jameson, 1983: 102).



themselves as labour force in order to survive. That is where the space for a political consideration of any practical or theoretical problem opens up. All products of history appear under determinate circumstances, within a framework set by the dominant mode of production at any given time, a mode that is characterized by antagonism, asymmetrical power relations, and, one must be constantly reminded especially in the context of a discussion of ethics and politics, by immense human suffering. ‘Sweetness and light’, to quote again Arnold’s celebrated phrase, is made possible for some only because the predicament of a vast number of people is characterized by neither ‘sweetness’ nor ‘light’.

From what I have said so far, it is perhaps understandable that I have several reasons to doubt whether such the socio-politicization of ethics I alluded to earlier in this chapter is anything more than a rhetorical gesture aiming at concealing the profound unease with which politics is dealt with in the context of ethical criticism. As I consider my work here as a kind of intervention into the current discourse on ethics and literature, I would like to offer an alternative perspective of looking at the issue of the politics of ethical criticism.

As I have previously argued the current trend in contemporary ethical criticism of politicising ethics, despite its being a partially useful gesture, is, from a certain point of view, an exercise in redundant theorizing. This is because no matter how rigorously one may argue for the political effects of moral discourse and the political relevance of ethical criticism the fact remains that a certain fundamental aspect of that discourse is constantly at risk of slipping from our sight: that ethics is structurally connected to politics and that despite the fact that these ties have often been severed either in misguided practice or in misguided theory. The level where ethics and morality are relevant, should – at least from my own point of view – be considered as a particular instance of the wider political context, despite the fact that the preoccupations proper to the latter tend to be constantly suppressed only to re-emerge as concerns over the former. This is also what happens in the case of ethical criticism and of literary criticism in general. The *aesthetic* and in the case of ethical criticism the *aesthetic*

and the *ethical* tend to substitute the *social* and the *political*. The literary work, instead of being examined as the product of a conjuncture of material and ideological resources in accordance with the economic and political interests articulated in the hegemonic discourses of its time of production, is often exiled in the spiritual, transhistorical world delimited by bourgeois aesthetics (and ethics). As a result the main ideological gesture of bourgeois ethics, namely the abstraction of individuals from society is reduplicated in the sphere of critical theory in the form of examining the moral content of literature apart from its material conditions of existence.

What moral criticism did in its traditional pre-modernist and modernist version was to deal with the moral qualities of literature as if those qualities were universal and ahistorical, emanating from an extra-historical space, a space defined a priori in defiance of all the evidence to its falsity. Both Leavis and Trilling, as I shall attempt to show in the following chapters, have each greatly relied on this idealist presupposition for their own ideological purposes. My view is that it was always wrong to examine literature as a moral testimony while at the same time leaving all the basic assumptions of moral philosophy unexamined, considering them as valid only because of their sheer givenness. By so doing, ethical, or more properly in this case, moral criticism was in fact engaging in an endless act of reduplication of those ideological features of moral philosophy that it was actually in a privileged position to expose and criticize. Privileged, because literature, due to its own peculiar status as a specific art form offers the critic the chance of a more close inspection of the human condition, not a transparent reading, nor a faithful reproduction of the actuality of the world, but a more intimate relation with the inexhaustible intricacies of the lived experiences of fictional, and by extension, one could cautiously argue, real others. To engage with literature, even as a critic, means to engage also with a particular mode of dramatizing the human condition. There is nothing sentimental about this; it merely means that in contradistinction with abstract philosophical discourse, literature, because of its specificity as an art form, engages with

human life in such a way as to enable a seemingly more direct, that is less mediated, comprehension of certain issues; at least a more direct comprehension that philosophy traditionally allows for.

Iris Murdoch has argued that “through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives” (Murdoch, 1983<sup>1</sup>: 49) and my view is that the apprehension of this density of life through literature does not necessarily imply transparency or any disregard for the artifice of literature, and it does certainly not imply that literary form or literary content can ever be perceived as anything other but essentially mediated features of a greater totality. Sartre’s late work has a lot to teach us about the nature of both this mediation and the nature of this totality as I shall have the opportunity to show in the chapter dedicated to his work. Direct comprehension here means that the mediations involved are more within reach of ordinary human consciousness, that the coded articulation of literary artefacts can be more easily, however deceitful this easiness may be, decoded without resource to a specialized metadiscourse as in the case of philosophy or theory.

One of the things that distinguishes contemporary ethical criticism from its older versions is the its heightened awareness of the issue of language, that is, of the linguistic constructedness of the literary artefact. This awareness of the crucial role of language’s status as mediator between human consciousness and reality has resulted in a more critical attitude toward basic issues in literary criticism like representation and its limits, truth-value, and extraliterary reality. However, this awareness, largely due to the impact of poststructuralist theories of literature, has led to a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the literary text is often presented as confined within a textual/linguistic space. On the other hand moral or ethical inquiry can be relevant as a form of criticism if its links with the always elusive ‘real’ referent of literature are not entirely severed. Literature’s alleged confinement in the ‘prison-

house of language<sup>32</sup> has been challenged in its basic presuppositions by almost all critics who are still inspired by the modernist, liberal humanist tradition.<sup>33</sup> The counter-argument to that objection is by now well-known: no matter how nostalgic we may be for an age of blissful ignorance when language was considered a transparent medium of communication, when semantic distortion and indeterminacy were errors to be corrected and not structural features of any form of representation, the truth is that we can never escape our own creation: language.

Yet, it seems to me that both arguments miss an important point and that is because their basic assumptions are flawed. It may well be that literature's referent is not an unmediated reality, inhabited by fully self-conscious individuals who are masters of their own meanings, social agents in perfect position to engage in rational debate. It may also be that literature's referent is not its own process of coming into being as a particular mode of artistic representation, its own constructedness as text. Instead it is possible to conceive that literature, like art in general, in fact signifies, among many other things, a certain absence; an absence of the historical conditions that enable it to come into being in the first place.<sup>34</sup> This absence, which I earlier designated by the term 'political unconscious' can be read in what we may call the 'ideology of the text'.

The procedure by which this ideology of the text works is by constructing a discursive space where the material conditions of the production of the text are suppressed, its rootedness in the realm of necessity is never brought into the foreground and consequently the text appears as coming from and belonging to the realm of freedom. Although I do have certain doubts as to whether this may be postulated for every text in every historical instance

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<sup>32</sup> The reference is to Fredric Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

<sup>33</sup> As Siebers argues "a moral philosophy that does not include the self may seem faultless, but its perfection rests in reality on the enormous void left by its rejection of the human. Removing the human from ethics leaves it without a basis for existence, since ethics is by definition profoundly anthropocentric" (Siebers, 1988: 110).

<sup>34</sup> Another way to formulate this is to start with the premise that literature (and literary criticism) in similar manner with ideology refer not to an objective reality but to the imaginary relations with or configurations of that reality in the individual and/or collective consciousness. The absence of any incorporation of the objective material conditions is a concomitant effect of this imaginary dimension.

I nevertheless believe that literature which is produced in certain type of societies, i.e. capitalist societies, is in fact constituted by the necessity not to speak of its own mode of production. This is not something that happens because of certain contingent factors but because it is structurally dependent on the conditions of its own existence. Moreover, it does not remain unchanged throughout history since we know that different historical periods negotiate their problems and limitations in strikingly different ways. In my opinion, it may be better conceived as something inherent in the very structure of artistic representation in societies based on unequal relations of power. It is the very task of a Marxist hermeneutics, as I understand it, to examine this absence and thereby offer a different context of interpretation. This type of hermeneutics would not try to extract a 'true meaning' out of the texts it examines, but would rather attempt to articulate what the texts seem to be unable to do themselves. In Pierre Macherey's own words: "knowledge is not the discovery or reconstruction of a latent meaning, forgotten or concealed. It is something newly raised up, an addition to the reality from which it begins" (Macherey 1978, 6). This brings me inevitably to the question of truth and the epistemological implications of a reading of the sort I am attempting to present here.<sup>35</sup>

To read a text along the lines of such a hermeneutics means to search and identify this absence of history. In other words, it also means to make manifest what is latent in the 'political unconscious' of the text. This hermeneutical process would ideally uncover the historical determinations of the text, its limitations regarding the identification of the historical Real, its evasions, its strategies of concealment. But it will also acknowledge that the text is truthful as much as it is deceitful, that it attempts to give plausible answers to (perhaps) implausible questions, that it articulates partial truths and not necessarily total lies. To accept that as one of my guiding principles means to avoid the risk of treating all texts as

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<sup>35</sup> My indebtedness to the critical practices of Pierre Macherey and Terry Eagleton must be abundantly clear by now. What I have merely indicated here are fully elaborated in Macherey, 1978: especially pp. 3 – 101 and in Eagleton, 1998.

outright apologies for what happens to be the existing order. It rather means to treat them as embodying historical tensions, which they then try to negotiate within certain limits imposed on them by their own ideological conditions of production. The identification of these limits is the task here.

Yet this process has another very important implication. A hermeneutic of the sort I am discussing in these pages need not be normative in the narrow sense of the word, in the sense usually denounced by postmodern critics.<sup>36</sup> Its task would not be to prescribe but to elucidate, to reveal, to lay bare so that ultimately a reality exposed for what it really is may be radically transformed. Whenever any political critique failed in this respect it was certainly not to its benefit. This however does not mean that such a critical practice should be considered as pluralistic, in the sense pluralism has acquired in the context of the liberal tradition, either.<sup>37</sup> Such a critical procedure cannot allow so readily a space for anything that happens to be simply 'different'. For a certain kind of criticism, such as the one that I am discussing in these pages, a certain mystification of otherness could potentially obscure its (political) priorities. From such a point of view, otherness, divergence, dissent have political value only to the extent that they enable one to understand their conditions of being and then synthesize them productively by the standards laid down by a problematic guided by its overriding concern for a total and at the same time radical human emancipation.

But what does this mean in relation to the main task of the kind of criticism I am advocating here? It means that nothing is to be achieved by a mere transposition from one

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Gibson, for instance, argues that "one of the problems with a literary theory and criticism that seeks to identify itself with a grand political project is that the conviction and sense of urgency inspired by the latter are likely to serve as a seemingly imperious justification - again - for a deontological morality as distinct from an ethics" (Gibson, 1999: 182). Earlier on in the same book Gibson wonders whether an ethics can proceed on the basis of a choice of sides, that is an ethico-politically informed choice. He then concludes his argument by voicing his doubt whether "a politics can function other than in terms of a kind of conviction or certitude which is the responsibility of ethics to hold in abeyance" (ibid, 85). My view is exactly the opposite, namely that only such a conviction can save any ethics from the humiliating status of its being a mere smokescreen for a political order that is profoundly contemptuous of any substantive content of ethics and morality.

<sup>37</sup> And how could it be otherwise given that the main premise of all pluralisms and liberal pluralism in particular is that there is no unitary good that may be regarded as more worthy than others. For Marxism, on the other hand, the radical emancipation of the working classes and by extension of all humankind is the ultimate objective, implicitly therefore the essential presupposition of the existence of a genuine good.

interpretive order to another. If the text finds a temporary ideological cohesion as a result of the efficacy of the powers that condition its production then a radical hermeneutics would do much better than merely reinterpret this text along an alternative code, although it has to be conceded that this may be a necessary step in the right direction. Instead, a better and more useful result may be achieved by questioning this very conceptual cohesion of the text, exposing it, as I said before, to the conditions (material and ideological) of its production and thus enabling a certain kind of reading that may then bring to the surface what the text was unable or unwilling to articulate in the first place, due to historical necessity if not due to authorial intention; its own complicity with a certain, very often unacknowledged, oppressive ideology. Therefore, a criticism of the sort I am arguing for here can only be faithful to its task by being in a position to survey as fully as possible the totality which conditions both the text and its immediate social and political context and which alone endlessly systematizes the historically contingent, the allegedly non-reducible historical event.<sup>38</sup>

I must now return to the initial aim of my research project. In its narrower context the interpretive process I have only sketched so far entails the posing of certain questions whose answers are barely inscribed in the texts themselves. What precisely does the ethical reading of literature yield? What are the presuppositions, which enable its coherent articulation? What is the historical ground for these? Why do these presuppositions privilege and, in a way, lay down a foundation for only a moral/ethical problematic instead of a political one? Does the former attempt to substitute or complement the latter? These are some of the questions I shall attempt to answer through the careful examination of three distinct bodies of work. I shall do that by attempting to establish the relation between their specific mode of enunciation, their thematics and their wider historical and ideological environment. I shall

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<sup>38</sup> In contradistinction to what I am advocating here a certain kind of deconstructive criticism suggests that criticism should aim “at a hermeneutics of indeterminacy ... a type of analysis that has renounced the ambition to master or demystify its subject (text, psyche) by technocratic, predictive or authoritarian formulas” (Hartman, 1980: 41). I do wonder about the consistency of this argument regarding the implicit injunction not to demystify. What exactly is deconstruction if not an attempt to demystify a certain Western philosophical (and cultural) tradition?

also try to read the texts that I have chosen as primarily ideological texts, as texts, which by the very specificity of their form and content, relate to, and indeed presuppose, historically specific relations of power, whatever form the latter may assume. The interpretive framework within which such a reading will take place presupposes a certain epistemology and a certain methodology of interpretation. The latter, as I argued before, will attempt to elucidate the text and relate it to (its) history in a critical and politically-informed fashion.

LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE QUESTION OF ETHICS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: F. R. LEAVIS, JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND LIONEL TRILLING

The main object of my research is the examination of three instances of a convergence of literary criticism and ethics, each belonging to a different national and ideological paradigm. In the process of this study I attempt to identify those elements that may be said to constitute a sort of an archaeology, in the Foucaultean sense, of the contemporary trend in literary theory that openly espouses a moral/ethical problematic and which I have discussed previously in this chapter. I shall do that by looking closely at the critical work of F. R. Leavis, Jean-Paul Sartre and Lionel Trilling. In doing so I shall concentrate on those aspects of their work that deal with the issues I am attempting to examine here. That is not to say that other aspects of their work will be ignored. Those aspects that do not explicitly deal with ethical and moral issues will be taken into account provided that they have something substantial to say about the issues in question even if they put emphasis on other aspects of the literary phenomenon.

The relation of these three critics with current ethical criticism is hardly a straightforward one. They can hardly be considered precursors of any specific ethical critical practice and I have not treated them as such. Their influence may have been huge but now they are hardly ever mentioned in the context of contemporary ethical criticism. If I see the re-examination of their work relevant for the current discussions in ethical criticism it is because they were



the first modern critics to turn their attention to the issues in question here and were the first to deal with them in the most consistent manner. A re-reading of their work can help us identify the political and ideological undercurrents in any kind of criticism that is based on moral/ethical principles. Finally, a crucial characteristic of their work is that it exemplifies the very critical models contemporary ethical criticism turned away from, since theirs was a work in profound agreement with the modernist paradigm which later critical trends, such as postmodernism set out to debunk.

In my choice of Leavis, Sartre and Trilling I have put emphasis on whether those elements that testify to a moral or ethical problematic are manifest in their critical texts. In reading their texts I have chosen to concentrate on the way the moral/ethical problematic is inscribed in the texts themselves. That entails an interpretive methodology which gives epistemological primacy to the text and not to the authorial intention. My arguments will be based to a great extent on what is corroborated by the textual and not by biographical or other anecdotal evidence. This text-centred approach risks ignoring the external, often contingent factors that determine the form and content of a text (i.e. the essayistic form and polemical nature of such a text) and thereby may result in an even narrower interpretation than what is normally expected. However, that should not imply that all extratextual information was suppressed. Whatever, in my opinion, merited specific attention was taken into account in direct proportion to its importance for the issues under consideration.

Another, equally important factor has been the consistency with which ethical or moral issues were dealt during the critic's entire career. The latter criterion, that is consistency through time, was the reason why I have chosen to examine the entire critical *oeuvre* of three major critics instead of opting for discussing individual works of many disparate ones. The consistency of their engagement with ethics and literature through time is what makes their work on that subject at least present itself as a system. Although it may be somewhat misleading to consider both Leavis and Trilling as exponents of anything approaching a

‘system of thought’ I do believe that a certain systematization of ideas, beliefs and disparate concepts does eventually take shape under the examining eye of an attentive reader. This systematic character of their engagement with the issues in question here is what yields the most in the interrelation between ethical criticism and politics that I am attempting to discuss.

Apart from these criteria I must also acknowledge the existence of the already given hierarchical categorizations of critical texts, a cultural fact of enough force so as to delimit a thematic space well in advance of any individual decisions. By this I mean that all three theorists have a prominent, though not necessarily unambiguous, place in the canon of twentieth-century criticism and theory. In many ways they impose themselves as the most suitable candidates for inclusion in any discussion about ethics and literature, with the possible exception of Sartre as I shall argue later on.

Another side-effect of my chosen primarily text-centred approach will be the neglect of another feature that inevitably characterizes all texts, namely their temporality and the various interpretive schemata that we use in order to make sense of them in our own time. That is to say that my reading will be one bound by the interpretive norms of the present time. That may be too self-evident to merit a mention but the reason that I am acknowledging it is that I think that this also entails a certain risk. This risk is that the method of ‘close reading’ that I alluded to above necessitates a bracketing of the actual effect any text has on its reader(s). It also avoids the issue of the historically and culturally determined character of such an effect. My reading of a text that has survived for decades cannot but differ significantly from the ones that were attempted at the time when it first appeared. I have chosen to ignore this aspect in order to avoid the risk of inflating the content of my chapter-length discussions, which otherwise would necessitate a radically different form than the one they have here.

The first critic whose work I have chosen to discuss is F. R. Leavis. He was, without a doubt, one of the most influential critics in the English-speaking world during the last

century, one whose work has exerted an enormous influence in the conception and teaching of English in the universities and in secondary education in Britain as well as in other parts of the English-speaking world. Leavis's critical practice – a singular mixture of empiricism and an almost theological belief on the absolute supremacy of tradition as a regulative ideal – was based on a cluster of notions that, though not exactly a system, did nevertheless constitute an internally consistent theoretical edifice. The key idea that animated the whole critical enterprise was his belief, following Matthew Arnold, that literature was a criticism of life, which means that literature for him was always referring not to itself but to reality, the reality of its readers which it always affected for better or for worse. Leavis's adamant belief was that literature's only legitimate *raison d'être* was that it conveyed in a manner unequalled by any other artistic medium a sense of continuity with the past, a sense of belonging to the same cultural community. What is of the utmost importance for my discussion here is the way Leavis perceived literature fulfilling such a function. He held that the moral quality of a work was what gave its readers the feeling of communality with each other and with their own 'race' (*sic*) in its historical evolution. For Leavis the distinctive features of a certain 'race' are codified in those aspects of literature that can only be properly studied from a moral and not from an aesthetic perspective.

In my view, Leavis is the archetypically petty-bourgeois theorist, the embodiment of a series of contradictions that he effaced, at least in the surface, by the sheer force of his own convictions. I have read his work as symptomatic of a certain dissatisfaction with what he perceived as the decline of the traditional culture of his own time, a culture very much the product of a tension between the older, yet still surviving, romantic ideals and the new imperatives of a growing capitalist market. Caught between these two poles Leavis chose to deal with the moral qualities of literature by engaging in a series of highly influential close readings that foregrounded above all the moral and by extension cultural value of each text. I have examined the strong moral inflection of his work in such a way so as to account for its

prominent features: its absolute commitment, its polemical character, its anti-theoreticism, and most importantly, in its substitution of tradition and ethics for politics.

For this and his consistently passionate commitment to a series of cultural interventions in defence of his strong and more often than not controversial positions I consider Leavis's critical work is absolutely central to the question of the interrelation between ethics/politics and literature in the context of literary criticism.

The second critic whose work I have chosen to discuss is Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre was undoubtedly one of the most important minds of the twentieth-century, a mind that exerted a far reaching influence in virtually every field of the humanities. His catholic interests which were complemented by his erudition and intellectual brilliance, his amazingly high rate of productivity which gave us a series of texts in a great number of literary and critical genres, along with his high visibility as a public figure all these make Sartre a theorist who cannot be easily classified. That is partly what makes his inclusion in the present study somewhat problematic, since he may have been a philosopher, a playwright and a critic of rare breadth, but it is not unreasonable to claim that his long-lasting contribution lies mainly within the field of philosophy and literature and not in ethical criticism. As a philosopher Sartre dealt with issues which, although related with ethics and literature, do not in themselves constitute a sufficient reason for his inclusion in the present study. As a playwright he did indeed deal with moral and political issues but I have chosen to ignore his literary work as it would necessitate a wholly different interpretive methodology and a substantially larger space allocated to him than what I could afford in the present study. Consequently, I have chosen to focus on only those writings that fall between his purely philosophical and literary work. If I have nevertheless chosen to examine Sartre's work I have done so believing that what he had to say about the issues in question here are of the utmost importance for my discussion even if they do not directly relate to literature or literary criticism.

Sartre has written a great deal on virtually every aspect covered by what we call the human sciences: philosophy, literature, political and social criticism, art and literary criticism. To these we should add his journalistic writings, his published interviews, his correspondence, not to mention all the anecdotal or autobiographical texts written by those with whom he had intimate relationships and in which Sartre features as the principal focus of the narrative. Given such a plethora of texts and orientations, one is obliged to follow a clearly delineated path which in turn will determine the choices that are to be made. Given my primary concern which in this case was the relation of the literary and the ethical in Sartre's critical writings I have chosen to concentrate only on the critical texts that I see as most pertinent for my discussion. The downside of this approach is of course that a considerable amount of Sartre's contribution will be either severely diminished or, at best, referenced implicitly at the expense of its distinctiveness and conceptual force. As I consider this an unavoidable compromise for what I have wished to achieve in discussing his work I can only hope that the main thrust of my argument has not been severely affected by this choice.

With all these in mind, I have chosen to examine Sartre's critical works as a series of texts that give expression to a sincere commitment to using literature and criticism as weapons in the cause of socialist transformation of society and the politics that such a cause entails. At the same time I saw these texts as testifying to the ideological tensions inherent in Sartre's thought which have to do with his eminently problematical attempted fusion of radical subjectivism (exemplified mainly in *Being and Nothingness*) with radical socialism (the main tenet of his postwar work). Another characteristic of Sartre's work was his ambivalence towards ethics, an attitude evidenced by his two failed attempts at formulating a coherent moral theory. This ambivalence was, in my opinion, characteristic of a more general difficulty to reconcile the imperatives of an ethics with the exigencies of revolutionary politics. Sartre has admirably never ceased to try to articulate a possible synthesis of the two despite the fact

that he always left the respective projects unfinished. Something else that characterized Sartre's work was his early belief in the power of literature, a belief that he gradually lost in his mid-period when his political commitment overshadowed all other preoccupations. Yet, during this early period, roughly comprising the period from the beginning of his career to the mid-fifties, Sartre left a series of text that examined in a most original manner the possible space where the ethical, the political and the literary converge. These texts are at the centre of my discussion.

In my view, Sartre exemplified better than almost anyone else the type of intellectual whose 'conversion' from an existence of social isolation to a commitment to revolutionary socialism dramatized in the most telling manner the common fate of all middle-class intellectuals who at one time chose to align themselves with the emancipatory demands of the working class. Sartre's case was also characteristic of the often painful compromises that needed to be made by an intellectual faced with the often conflicting demands of two occasionally incompatible systems: socialist politics and (bourgeois) ethics. In the context of this study, I am primarily interested in Sartre's unflinching dedication to the project of uniting these two ideological systems by means of articulating a politically legitimate synthesis of them.

The third critic whose work I have chosen to examine is Lionel Trilling. He was one of the most interesting and authoritative voices of American twentieth-century literary criticism. His relevance for this study lies in his consistent commitment to the ethical aspects of literature, a commitment that marked the entirety of his work. Trilling shared with Leavis the belief in the normative uses of literature; yet he, unlike the latter, expressed that in a style that was distinctly unpolemical. This style was eminently suited to his ideological position, his belief in the necessity of the middle-class ideals which he so eagerly espoused. Trilling was the theorist of the American educated middle classes, a critic whose voice articulated the

malaise of a growing number of middle-class intellectuals with the radical heritage of the pre-war era. As an ideologue of the cultural and political rehabilitation of the old bourgeois values Trilling made extensive use of the single most effective weapon in his critical arsenal. A true Arnoldean to the end Trilling based his critical method on a number of arguments that sought to persuade his readership that literature was still able to play the morally edifying role that it allegedly played in the nineteenth century. As I shall attempt to argue, the moral, and by extension political, value of literature and its consequent use as a means of cultural and political re-education was Trilling's individual mark on twentieth-century American criticism. I have read his work as an instance of the concentrated effort which during the Cold War era attempted to purge American liberalism of any trace of external, mainly Marxist, influences and thus enable the formation of an ideological space where liberalism might be expressed without posing a direct threat for the status quo. This political interpretation has informed my discussion of his work.

In this final part of my study I have chosen to discuss all the three theorists together in an effort to identify any possible convergences or divergences in their critical methods. In doing this I have tried to situate their work in an era, roughly from the twenties to the seventies, which was marked by cataclysmic changes and which affected some of the most fundamental premises of Western humanist culture. In this section, I discuss the critical projects of Leavis, Sartre and Trilling as essentially constituting an articulated reaction to the great historical and ideological shifts of that time.

All the three theorists discussed here are representative, each in his own way, of many of the fundamental critical attitudes and methodologies that had currency during the best part of the twentieth century. Their work, antecedent to the era that we may designate as the 'advent of theory' when theoretical preoccupations came to substitute to a great extent the more practical and evaluative considerations of the past, is, I believe, still crucial for our

understanding of the foundations of our own ideas and methods. The importance of their work lies not only in what they said but also in what they came to represent for all those who came later and who, implicitly or explicitly, accepted, modified or rejected this work. There is of course a more specific reason as to why they merit special attention. My view is that their work touches directly upon issues which lie at the very centre of this set of problems and attendant critical methodologies which, as I have already discussed in this chapter, comprise the core of what is currently known as ethical criticism<sup>39</sup>.

What I have said so far provides the ideological and methodological framework which will inform the examination of the three critics, whose work I aim to discuss in detail in the following chapters. For all the reasons I mentioned above I have read their work as a group of texts, whose primary concern was something not only extremely vital to our negotiations with literature, and consequently with society and ourselves, but also something very important in its own right as a particular mode of addressing the problems that literature as social phenomenon poses for us. This is important not only because of its nature and the central place it occupies in our tradition, but also because of its close relation with politics, its centrality to the question of ideology and power – in short because of its political relevance.

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<sup>39</sup> With the possible exception of Sartre as he seems to have influenced ethical criticism the least. The main reason for this neglect of Sartrean 'literary' ethics is the fact that Sartre was and still is the object of scholarly attention as mainly a philosopher and a writer. His literary-critical arguments have traditionally been considered a subset of his more general philosophical preoccupations.



## LITERATURE AND THE MORAL DUTY OF ENLIGHTENED MINORITIES: THE CRITICISM OF F. R. LEAVIS

... to appreciate Conrad's 'form' is to take stock of a process of relative valuation conducted by him in the face of life: what do men live by? what *can* men live by? – these are the questions that animate his theme. His organization is devoted to exhibiting in the concrete a representative set of radical attitudes, so ordered as to bring out the significance of each in relation to a total sense of human life. The dramatic imagination at work is an intensely moral imagination, the vividness of which is inalienably a judging and a valuing.

*The Great Tradition*

It is commonplace to begin a discussion of F. R. Leavis by emphasising both his importance as one of the most important literary critics of the twentieth century and also his ambiguous status in the canon of English criticism. This ambivalence, by now so often enacted in criticism as to pass almost unnoticed, is nevertheless easily understandable and explicable. Leavis has been a very powerful and most uncompromising critic and at the same time a very single-minded and persistent individual. His clarity of vision went hand in hand with a narrowness of focus. His consistency was admirable to the same extent that his refusal to acknowledge certain key aspects of his object of study was highly problematic. Yet, what becomes clear when one reads his work attentively is that it is precisely because of his critical and methodological peculiarities which generate so many tensions in his work that his criticism retains its power years after its initial appearance. The effect that Leavis's criticism has had over the years is also the product of yet another characteristic of his work, a characteristic not so much of the individual behind the critical work but of a whole tradition, a lineage which includes Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Carlyle and Arnold among others. This

tradition is one characterized by dissent, social awareness and strong moral ideas<sup>40</sup>. It is a tradition that has left a clear mark in the intellectual and cultural heritage of Leavis's England and also, closely examined, a cultural formation which indicates a highly complex and largely unconscious process of transformation and adaptation. This process may be construed as one of negotiation and eventual coming to terms with a situation that makes both the *raison d'être* of the critical practice and also its efficacy (*qua* cultural activity) problematic in a context by and large indifferent, if not openly hostile, to what this critical activity was ideally supposed to represent. That was a process in which all the intellectual figures in this long family line took part, in the head of which Milton may be placed as a symbol of Protestant dissent. This religious and later on mostly secular dissent was coupled with an individualism that became all the more obstinate the more Western man found himself drawn away from the metaphysical certainties of religion. Both of these features are the two main characteristics of such a line of thought. Leavis is the first modern critic in this lineage, a critic whose moral seriousness and clarity of intent, marks his criticism from its early years to the end.

Leavis started as a critic in the late twenties soon after modernism had begun to assert itself, a time during which a change of large proportions was altering the cultural face of the West. This cataclysmic change, with which I shall deal further on, was not only a change of modes of artistic expression, a change of cultural tropes, as it were, but a more deep and far-reaching shift of a cultural formation which was by then reaching its own limits. I consider this cultural formation as roughly extending from the Augustan period in the eighteenth century to the late Victorian period. During this time capitalism was making inroads into hitherto unaffected areas of human life and the class most to profit from such an expansion was gradually trying to secure its hegemonic status not simply in the financial centres and the national parliaments but in the cultural centres as well. This process of legitimising the status

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<sup>40</sup> A treatment of Leavis as essentially a radical reformer in a long line of English bourgeois radicalism is to be found in Fred Inglis's *Radical Earnestness: English Social Theory 1880-1980*, (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982).

quo which in fact meant the capitalist market and the parliamentary democracy that guaranteed its growth and relative stability was never a simple process. It was rather an uneven battle between high principles and a reality that was gradually becoming all the more bleak; a conflict between a whole new conception of life in a civilized world and the catastrophic effects of a system which, as we were approaching the twentieth century, was more and more contested by those who suffered under it. Leavis's formative years were marked by the historical tensions of that era and it was to his credit that he produced a body of work that, in its most fortunate instances at least, registers these tensions with a heightened realization of their urgency.

Leavis became conscious of the major shifts in the culture of the West very early in his life. As a result of this great cultural and political shift which was registered with such painful awareness in the first modernist art and literature, he – like so many middle-class young men who saw their ideals shattered in the course of World War I – set out to defend with an admirable zeal the only thing that, to his judgment, guaranteed a profoundly meaningful life and a defence against the 'technologico-Benthamite' (as was his own term) tendency of our civilization.

Leavis set out to combat the most destructive aspects of industrial capitalism by employing a strategy of simultaneous attacks on three distinct fronts. The first front was the mass-market aspects of modern technology, epitomized by pulp fiction and the movies; the second front was the upper-middle-class attitude of the established intelligentsia, exemplified then by the Bloomsbury group; and last but not least the ascending Marxist criticism which Leavis perceived and interpreted as part of the problem that he and his like-minded peers were facing. This strategy, holistic in its essence and grand in its scope, would be totally ineffectual if it were not backed up by an equally impressive arsenal of concepts and ideas to enable the enlightened minority, which Leavis wished for and later attempted to create and educate with *Scrutiny*, to contain as much as possible the effects of the established centres of

power which were sanctioning complacency, ignorance and vulgarity. In reaction to such a state of affairs Leavis promoted certain critical concepts which he believed would challenge the prevailing certainties about literature and its role in the world. These concepts – which raised many important critical issues while being notoriously undertheorised by their originator – were life, organic community, cultural continuity, tradition, personal integrity, sincerity, and maturity.

Leavis's criticism constitutes an ensemble, a coherent whole which has proved to be immensely influential and pivotal to any discussion of twentieth-century English criticism. His main and long-standing critical achievements are: his insistence on the social function of literature; his re-articulation of a phenomenology of reading that ultimately returns the individual to the community that alone can validate both the work and the act of reading; his elaboration of a new hermeneutic code that is based on moral sensitivity and responsibility. Yet these achievements are intricately connected to the deficiencies of his criticism, its blind spots as it were. The ones most pertinent to my discussion here are: his inability to properly diagnose the ills of the culture of his time and attribute them to their proper causes: namely, his inability to see industrial capitalism as generating all kinds of potentialities and cancelling them at the same time; his unwillingness to re-examine his initial basic assumptions even in view of evidence that would legitimize such a reappraisal, his unwillingness, for instance, to see anything particularly worthwhile in post-war culture; and finally his eventual retreat into a retrogressive and at times stubbornly conservative mode of thought. All these testify to a great internal tension in his thought, one of the most emblematic points of which is the predominance of the moral element in his criticism. This is what I am going to deal with in the rest of this chapter.

In examining certain basic notions in Leavis's critical work I wish to follow through some of the implications of their usage in his critical practice. I take this to be the first step towards a clearer understanding of the unacknowledged politics of his criticism. However, I

must emphasize that these notions should not be examined in isolation, although such a step may be analytically necessary, but as parts of a greater discursive totality which is Leavis's critical and cultural discourse. This discourse is complex, multifaceted and often highly idiosyncratic but it is also very much a product of its own historical context. It is also – and that is most crucial to my endeavour here – a discourse not only about the technical, specialised aspects of literature but a more far-reaching one about literature-in-the-world, about literary works and their interpretations, authors and their appraisal within an identifiable historical context. It is one of Leavis's great achievements that he always insisted on the close relation between literature and life, between 'significant form' and objective reality. The essentially moral quality of his criticism is concomitant with this preoccupation with lived experience and with a cultural politics that reaches far beyond the limited scope of the personal and the subjective. Yet this very same quality is also indicative of his critical shortcomings, his inability to pursue his criticism in those directions that would enable him to avoid the rather simplistic generalisations that consequently led him away from the intimate and profound understanding that he so passionately advocated in his writings. In what follows I shall concentrate on those aspects of his work that fall within the object of my enquiry leaving aside certain other aspects, the relevance of which I consider less significant. Needless to say, his work is an integrated whole and my emphasis on certain aspects should in no way be inferred as implying a lack of importance. It is rather the attempt to establish a hierarchy of relevance.

#### THE INTER-WAR PERIOD AND THE ARTICULATION OF A NEW CULTURAL POLITICS

In the 1920s, at a time when Leavis began to explore the themes that would later become the cornerstones of his critical practice, sweeping changes transformed the face of Western Europe and the Britain in particular. World War I left its deep marks on every aspect of Western societies, social, political and economic. The October Revolution in Russia resulted

in the formation of a new state that represented a serious challenge to the political and economic organization of the West. The Depression showed in a most dramatic manner the limits of capitalism and most particularly the immense human suffering the structural deficiencies of such a system could cause. The feeling of discontent that prevailed during the interwar years pushed a great percentage of the suffering population to either of the two extremes of the political spectrum. During those years of social polarisation and the disturbing memory of the totally inexcusable atrocities of the first mass war in human history there was the appearance of another distinctly modern phenomenon: the coming of age of the leisure industry for the masses, whose ideal media were the then still new radio broadcast and the Hollywood film. This leisure industry – later on to be called the ‘culture industry’ by Adorno and Horkheimer in their classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment*<sup>41</sup> – had a great number of profound and far-reaching effects. However, what caught the attention of the young intellectuals, anxious about the state of the world they lived in, were its immediate short-term effects. One of these effects was its predominance as a mass entertainment form and the fact that its products gradually but steadily replaced the most traditional forms of both public and private entertainment. This cultural transformation, the birth of the leisure industry and the ‘culture’ that relates to it and its products, had an overwhelming effect on Leavis. But before I go into the details of this encounter with the then nascent ‘culture industry’ I must bring into the discussion another aspect of the history of the first decades of the twentieth century: the intensification of key aspects of industrial capitalism among which the most relevant to my discussion are the technologization and rationalization of the processes of production and the regulation of consumption as well.

Advertising, one of the major cultural phenomena of the era, was gradually transformed into a technique, a process of persuading the public to consume products thus boosting demand for the greater number of products that came out of the factories. In addition to

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<sup>41</sup> “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 120-167.

that, and most importantly, advertising was giving birth to a set of consumer attitudes that would facilitate the perpetuation of a specific kind of consumption along the lines of the new trends in industrial output. This purely economic phenomenon, the planned, rationalised intensification of demand, had effects that extended to other levels of society. One of these effects was the utilization of cultural resources in such a way so as to comply with rules, necessities and aspirations that had very little, if anything, to do with the traditional role that these resources played in the past. One of the most important of these cultural resources was language. This new technique of addressing the consumers, of manipulating their desire for fulfilling their real or imaginary needs, made use of language in ways that were perceived to distort the established semantic wealth and legitimate uses of the words used. Advertising was only one of the new phenomena that resulted from the profound changes in the organisation of capitalism during that time. The other was the introduction of planning and rationalisation as technical procedures aiming at perfecting the economic system, thus securing more profits and less waste for all the industries involved. These practices soon spread well beyond the organisational infrastructure of Western industry to places that were up until then relatively unaffected by them. One of these places was the academic world and particularly the humanities which were until then perceived as being exempted from the 'vulgar' preoccupations characteristic of an era obsessed with productivity and effectiveness. It was during that time that concepts such as 'professionalization' entered the vocabulary of administration in the humanities and particularly in the sensitive area of 'English' where the very content of the discipline as well as the heavy historical and cultural weight of its object of study determined to a great extent the formation of a specific, identifiable academic subculture. It was this academic subculture where these new cultural changes were most painfully registered. The perceived 'contamination' of an almost sacred place, the university along with the 'levelling down' of culture were both factors that helped shape Leavis's attitude towards the cultural shifts he experienced first-hand during those years.

But advertising was not the only thing that threatened the inviolability of the culture of letters. Nor, was professionalization the only negative effect of a rapidly changing social and economic environment. Mass literacy, economic depression and the necessity of the system to effectively regulate non-productive time all combined to produce yet another effect: mass entertainment. This new phenomenon had many forms, which were produced and packaged with a single purpose in mind: to be easily and effortlessly consumed by an always increasing number of people whose need for entertainment it would satisfy. The cheap novel, the cinema, all such forms of mass entertainment seemed, at least in the minds of certain intellectuals, to threaten the cultural cohesion of society by a gradual process whereby certain new and morally ambiguous cultural practices would displace the virtues typical of a culture pregnant with significance and relevance at every level of its structure. If that 'culture' was in danger it was because its main weapon was appropriated by the negative, destructive forces of 'civilisation'. Language, the medium which served Shakespeare as well as his epigones was now serving those who had other, entirely different, cultural goals. Among the many negative aspects of a growing industrial capitalism Leavis chose to concentrate on the threat posed to culture by the increasing pressure it had to endure from the 'external' world of economic progress and technological efficiency. His first important publication, the pamphlet *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* deals precisely with this issue. In it Leavis attempts to deal with the negative effects of the sweeping changes of his time by concentrating on the one thing that he thinks is capable of any effective resistance: culture. It is not easy to find a tight definition of culture in this work. All we are offered is an approximation of a definition at the beginning of this essay. After having stated (and not argued for) the importance of the existence of a small normative elite Leavis concludes that

Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the



implicit standards that order the *fine living* of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there. In their keeping (...) is the language, the changing idiom, upon which *fine living* depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By "culture" I mean the use of such a language. (Leavis, 1933: 15) (italics mine)

In this passage we may identify the most important and recurring themes of his cultural politics; the necessity for a cultural elite, the importance of tradition, the key role played by language. I believe that by examining these propositions closely we may come to a more precise understanding of the essentially moral inflection of his own discourse. The first point worth considering is the positing of tradition as the outer limit of human experience, the most general context within which any proposition or act is properly signified. What is significant here, as in all the other of Leavis's works, is the absence of history. Tradition is seen as what regulates the temporal axis of humankind and is perceived in such a way so as to exclude alternative concepts such as history. This exclusion is made possible by positing tradition as a highly selective process where negativity and contradiction are simply not present. True to his Arnoldian heritage Leavis posits tradition as the repository of the finest human experience of the past. In his view this amassing of excellence seems to take place in a social space devoid of conflict. But then why are these 'fine things' perishable? If tradition is devoid of conflicts and contradictions why is it necessary to be overtly cautious about the frailty of all its finest achievements? Leavis would answer that it is the current state of affairs that endangers traditional values, the Age of Machine that is structurally inimical to the vulnerable qualities of the cultural past. That is precisely why there is a necessity for a guardian elite. The members of such an elite would be the ones that possess the power and the necessary qualities to protect the fragile excellence of the past against the threat of 'levelling down' posed by a present appearing to be entirely devoted to material satisfaction. In my view, this elite in Leavis's discourse is supposed to regulate the circulation of cultural

capital by a double process. Firstly, it functions in a legislative capacity by deciding what is worthy of preservation, full of relevance and significance; and secondly, by regulating the means for the dissemination of the cultural values which are approved and thus worthy of entering the public sphere. This makes it at the same time a law-giver and a gate-keeper. It institutes and it regulates at the same time. Its currency is not money but something much more crucial to a cultural politics: language.

#### THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE

Leavis leaves us with no doubt as to where the real importance lies. Language is the one thing 'upon which fine living depends'. This essentially moral conception of language makes him conceive it as the essential regulating centre of any social formation. It is a centre that determines all the other elements; it determines the essential qualities and the ultimate aim of life. It is the space where the axiological dimension of any cultural practice is to be found. It is interesting to note that Leavis here constructs a two-level explanatory model roughly analogous to the Marxian one which posits an ideological and institutional superstructure reflecting an underlying economic base.. The crucial difference is of course that Leavis posits language as the base and 'finer living' as the superstructure. The result is that the materiality of human existence is almost completely effaced as a significant factor in the evolution of humankind. The repercussions of such a conception of language will be examined later on. What is worth emphasizing at this point is that language, as far as Leavis is concerned, is the supreme medium through which tradition orients and reproduces itself and, since that medium is also used by those inimical to cultural continuity and excellence, it becomes almost self-evident that language must be guarded by those who can resist the temptations of a world seemingly devoid of moral imagination. The necessity of a cultural elite becomes thus a matter in need of no further justification since the evocation of the imminent danger

of a loss of cultural purity is, seemingly, an effective rhetorical device for the imposition of this view.

In *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* Leavis attempts to make precise what exactly is this imminent danger. In so doing, he concentrates mainly on those cultural phenomena that seem to relate to an increasingly large number of people. He mentions advertising techniques, putting emphasis on the fact that they are applied where one would least expect them applied, i.e. in literary reviews. He also mentions the effects of mass entertainment such as cinema and cheap novels on the unprepared public. In each case he sees a similar pattern in the organisation of cultural material. He sees a general devaluation of (accepted) meaning, a trivialisation of values through the reference to unacceptable cultural criteria and finally a persistent axiological undermining of everything that could be considered truly significant. But this process of discrediting 'culture' could easily be regarded as no more than a temporal anomaly, something that a generous dose of 'the best that has been said and thought in the world', as Arnold famously put it, could cure for good. Yet this is clearly not the case for Leavis. If he is concerned about these social trends it is because he sees all too clearly that they have mass appeal, that they ultimately concern all those involved regardless of social status or education. It is this utterly monologic, mass-directed quality of their discourse and the impact of such a profusion of distracting signals on the average public that worries him. In his own words:

But the modern [average cultivated person] is exposed to a concourse of signals so bewildering in their variety and number that, unless he is especially gifted or especially favoured, he can hardly begin to discriminate. Here we have the plight of culture in general. The landmarks have shifted, multiplied and crowded upon one another, the distinctions and dividing lines have blurred away, the boundaries are gone, and the arts and literatures of different countries and periods have flowed together... (Leavis, 1933: 31)

Upon reading this passage it becomes immediately evident that the danger lies in the confusion caused by the overexposure to conflicting stimuli. What holds culture together is for Leavis the integrity of its whole discursive universe. Everything has its place and everything is organically related to everything else. This is evidently what is at stake in the era of mass information: the loss of the determining centre, the absence of any kind of regulation of so much information with the consequence of making the receiving public vulnerable to accepting and consuming things not only irrelevant but also hardly conducive to its moral well-being. But this is only the obvious part of the argument. What is implicitly said here is that any prospect for a stable social and cultural order is put at risk when the powers of discrimination are weakened. We begin to see that it is not only a matter of regret for the loss of cultural integrity but an implicit formulation of a politics in the wide sense of the word, however evasive such a formulation may be.

Leavis has his attention firmly focused on his times and yet manages not to see what is essential. He has every reason to feel threatened by capitalism which he constantly refers to by way of metonymical formulations – industrialism, age of the machine, technologico-Benthamite worldview – but he is unable to explain anything. The dialectics of capitalist expansion and cultural disorientation are registered in his work in rather simplistic terms. There is also no consideration of the fact that mass entertainment was a decisive step in the direction of effectively containing the social unrest caused by massive unemployment and increased hardship by means of providing an outlet for the potentially destructive energy of a great number of the suffering population. The political implications of all such ‘innovations’ and ‘devices’ do not find even the slightest acknowledgement in his work. For him it is entirely a clash of two conflicting worldviews: ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’. Leavis claims that these two ‘are coming to be antithetical terms’ and that ‘it is not merely that the power and the sense of authority are now divorced from culture’ but also ‘some of the most disinterested solicitude for civilisation is apt to be, consciously or unconsciously, inimical to

culture' (Leavis, 1933: 39). Once more it is suggested that there is a relation between the lack of authority and the regrettable state of affairs in the present day. We can also identify another assumption – a permanent feature in his later criticism – namely, that, no matter how good the intentions may be, working in a context other than that defined by true culture is doomed to failure.<sup>42</sup> These two points need to be further discussed.

Leavis is trying to establish a rigid binary opposition between 'culture' and 'civilisation' and that has the consequence of trying to define as unequivocally as possible two distinct, separate spaces. The relation between them is assumed to be a relation of real, demonstrable differences. Therefore conflict is not only possible but, under certain conditions, inevitable. What this means is that Leavis posits his opposition of culture/non-culture, in such a way as to preclude both the consideration of any possible affinities between these two seemingly incommensurable entities, but also, and most importantly for my discussion here, the possibility of a dialectical relation between the two. This has the effect of clearing the path for pursuing a strategy of opposing the one to the other without any concern for the more deep and complex relations that determine a continuous interaction between these supposedly distinct spheres. Due to this structural limitation of his thinking Leavis is compelled to empty the space of 'civilisation' of any possible significance and conversely endow the space of 'culture' with more significance than it allows for. Instead of exploring the contradictions immanent in each, something that would enable him to examine critically his own presuppositions as well, Leavis secures in an imaginary level an order and an integrity that do not correspond to anything conceptually or empirically verifiable in actual reality. Yet his strategy has another implication as well. If his own chosen side, the side of 'culture' is conceived as essentially free from tensions internally it is certainly not protected from any pressures that might come from outside. 'Culture' is vulnerable because it is the property of a select few. Such vulnerability makes imperative the imposition of authoritarian

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<sup>42</sup> In Leavis's mind this failure is, of course, a moral failure not a practical one.

measures, an almost instinctual response to an outside threat that is demonised in direct proportion to the naivety of its conception. 'Culture' is in constant danger of succumbing to pressure and thus exposing an absence within its very structure. This 'empty space' in the structure is filled by the concept of the 'minority'. The necessity of this minority and its importance for the preservation of cultural memory and cohesion is directly linked to both the inflationary conception of 'culture' and the imaginary powers that the 'enemy' is assumed to possess. The more expansionist the 'civilisation' is perceived to be the more rigid the ideological framework within which this minority chooses to work. Leavis is unable to contemplate a culture without some sort of fixed social and therefore also political hierarchies in place. The more he is unable or unwilling to explain the drastic changes of his era the more he is prone to adopting an often conservative approach in his endeavour to defend whatever is deemed worthy of such defence.

This ideological scheme has another side-effect as well. If politics in its more inclusive sense is absent from his thought then an alternative space opens up which assumes the functions of a political critique. This space is the space of the *moral*. Within it all considerations about language and culture acquire a distinctive meaning and purpose. They become serious in their tone and relevant with respect to the needs they address themselves to. But what is most important is that they are now predicated upon an explanatory conceptual mode that endows them with a *gravitas* essential to their intended function. This mode is a permanent feature of the English critical tradition from the eighteenth century up to Leavis's own time. As a particular mode in literary and cultural criticism it has passed through many stages, from the normative, didactic and still Christian attitude of Samuel Johnson and Coleridge to the secular and more programmatic tone of Arnold. It has been a shifting but essentially unaltered mode of thought; shifting because of historical necessity but unaltered nevertheless for the same reason. Samuel Johnson might have been confident enough in his own society to consider a moral fault as indicative of a deviation from the

established norm and not as an internal possibility of the creative process; Arnold, for his part, might have been less confident in his own society so as to consequently attempt to substitute the higher morality of an ideal culture for a dying and ineffective religion in order to achieve social cohesion and avoid 'anarchy'. What, I believe, must be noted here is that these two instances of cultural politics need not obscure the fact that what was essentially at stake was the effacement of all the contradictions inherent in the social and economic systems both these thinkers belonged to and supported. Leavis was no exception. His criticism is determined by his ideological allegiance to the core principles characteristic of this school of thought and so it is no surprise that his cultural criticism utilizes the one ideological resource most central to this whole tradition of cultural politics, namely morality. The moral core of Leavis's criticism is thus not only the organising centre around which everything in his work is structured but also an index of the ideological continuity manifested in his thought in the context of English letters. Yet his moral criticism is distinct from what existed before in the sense that it is an attempt to restructure the essential components of that discourse in order to engage with certain distinctly modern phenomena in industrial societies. I need to emphasise here something that is nevertheless implied by my own treatment of Leavis's criticism. Leavis's moral criticism is exemplary in many respects, but the one characteristic that mostly stands out is his admirable restraint when it comes to moralising. No matter how strong his moral ideas are Leavis always tries to show not what we should consider good or bad, but what is worthy of our consideration as a legitimate moral concern.<sup>43</sup> For that reason, although it is not the only one, his criticism is absolutely vital to the understanding of the uses of the *moral* as a conceptual mode and explanatory code in literary and cultural criticism.

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<sup>43</sup> John Casey has argued, commenting on Leavis's criticism, that "(t)o insist that a serious concern with certain problems of life is a 'moral' concern is not the same thing as to say that it is a morally good concern; it rather to say that it is the sort of concern which is in the province of morality, or which is the material of moral judgements." (Casey: 1966: 182).

To even attempt to comprehend the moral texture of Leavis's criticism entails a concentrated effort to systematize the various elements or, more concretely, conceptual points of reference that animate his whole critical endeavour. This is what I plan to examine now by looking more closely at each key concept as each appears in Leavis's early works.

#### SERIOUSNESS, SINCERITY, VITALITY AND ORGANIC COMMUNITY: THE CONCEPTUAL ARSENAL OF A MORAL POLEMICIST

Leavis first major critical works are *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Revaluation* (1936). In them he deals exclusively with poetry, a literary form that was, for him, the one most suited to the preservation of those cultural values that he, as a critic, was defending. These two books, along with the essays collected in *For Continuity* (1933), are the ones where certain concepts which underpin Leavis's whole critical endeavour appear for the first time. Such concepts not only constitute the hard core of his critical system but also determine this system's applicability and scope by effectively mapping out a notional terrain and by conditioning to a large extent the methodological choices that are made. Leavis's whole critical method is based on a set of values, the first formulation of which we find in the pages of these books.

In the prefatory chapter of *New Bearings in English Poetry* entitled "Poetry and the Modern World", Leavis gives us the reason why poetry is what matters most. According to Leavis, it matters "because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age. He is, as it were, at the most conscious point of the race in his time." (Leavis, 1959: 13). Here, the poet is the artist embodying the spirit of his age, an artist endowed with this rare quality of being alive to the present with such a dedication and clear-sightedness that he is able to perceive and consequently communicate to us the more profound truths of our own time. Further down the same chapter we read that "all that we can fairly ask of the poet is that he shall show himself to have been fully alive in our time." (ibid, 24) This is the first



concise formulation of Leavis's moral criticism. Any author and by extension literature are to be evaluated by moral standards and not by purely technical ones. A certain belletristic attitude towards literature gives way to the high-seriousness of moral criticism and Leavis is very explicit as to which attitude he champions.

The moral criticism that Leavis proposes is not merely a personal preference of a sensitive critic but the only method that can bring about the desired results in the context of contemporary history. Leavis tells us that "urban conditions, a sophisticated civilization, rapid change and the mingling of cultures have destroyed the old rhythms and habits, and nothing adequate has taken their place. The result is a sense, apparent in the serious literature of the day, that meaning and direction have vanished." (ibid, 61) and by that he sets the context within the framework of which his own criticism eventually makes sense. The meaninglessness and directionlessness of contemporary culture is what Leavis wishes to address by means of talking about poetry and the absolute values it carries from generation to generation. It is these values that are mostly endangered in an era when, in "considering our present plight" Leavis reminds us "we have also to take account of the incessant rapid change that characterizes the Machine Age. The result is breach of continuity and the uprooting of life." He then comments on the aptness of the metaphor by saying that "what we are witnessing to-day is the final uprooting of the immemorial ways of life, of life rooted in the soil." (ibid, 91) What we are given here as a context for modern literature and criticism is the loss of the organic community, a constant feature of Leavis's criticism up until the end of his life.

#### 'ORGANIC COMMUNITY' AND THE NEED FOR CULTURAL CONTINUITY

What this notion conveys is of the utmost importance to my task here. This is so because it carries with it all sorts of connotations, the precise nature of which is essential for any political decoding of Leavis's literary and cultural criticism. In Leavis's world-view 'organicity'

is what characterizes any social formation that has not succumbed to the pressures of the technological and ultimately deeply alienating imperatives of the industrial ethos of modern times. In keeping with a long tradition of conservative thought Leavis identifies this era of communal bliss as something irrevocably lost<sup>44</sup>. His fictitious sociological model allows him to take his contemporary society to task for being so remote from this ideal. In his *Culture and Environment*, a book he co-authored with Denys Thompson, Leavis wrote

What we have lost is the organic society with the living culture it embodied (...) an art of life, a way of living, ordered and patterned, involving social arts, codes of intercourse and a responsive adjustment, growing out of immemorial experience, to the natural environment and the rhythm of the year (...) It is not merely that life (...) has become urban and industrial. When life was rooted in the soil town life was not what it is now. (Leavis, 1933:1-2)

This Edenic society embodied a 'living culture' growing out of 'immemorial experience' which means that history was then essentially natural time which in its mute physicality was the foil for the 'natural environment and the rhythm of the year'. Leavis claims that such a society existed up until the seventeenth century during which time there appeared a rift in the culture of the period. The great economic changes that brought about the growth of big industrial and financial centres and the subsequent, equally great, changes in all the non-material aspects of life were also the fundamental causes of cultural decay. Mechanization, the principle of calculation and efficiency, economics and the whole cult of production of goods conceived in this case as the crucial defining moment of modern culture, all these are for Leavis ills of a system that promotes a distorted vision of progress and of what a good life really is. Capitalism is thus criticised for being a system that promotes a hollow materiality, the dissociation of work and leisure, the levelling-down of standards and

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<sup>44</sup> See Raymond Williams's illuminating concluding note after his chapter on Leavis in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Williams, 1963: 256-257).

ultimately the radical separation of man from the soil and nature, that is from a state of grace and essential fulfilment.<sup>45</sup>

Leavis's views are however qualified – and thus appearing less vulnerable to the charges of naïve and reactionary historiography – by claiming that organic society was essentially a model which served more as a reminder of the loss that humanity suffered under the conditions of the last two centuries than as a real, concretely identifiable historical entity. In his infamous “Two Cultures?” talk (1962) Leavis even went so far as to say that he was by no means “preaching that we should defy, or try to reverse, the accelerating movement of external civilization (...) that is determined by advancing technology” (Leavis, 1972: 59). This sort of corrective argument was to be seen all the more frequently in Leavis's last essays from the sixties onwards. Yet, what is important here is the logic behind his notion of the ‘organic community’. Critics by and large sympathetic to Leavis's work have tried to interpret his references to the ‘organic community’ as an index of his profound anxiety regarding the deterioration of community, the loss of cultural continuity, the gradual degradation of traditional values and last but not least the moral vacuum in which twentieth-century Western societies seemed to have been entrapped. Fred Inglis comments that Leavis's use of the ‘organic community’ is to be understood – in the context of the specific cultural tradition to which Leavis belonged – as the only viable conceptual alternative to historical facts like the “placelessness and the helpless mobility of the labour forces” and the concomitant effects of such an alienating process. In this view “when this deracination is allied to the collapse, at least in capitalism's heartlands, of a credible theology and to the disappearance of God” (Inglis, 1982: 105) it is hardly surprising that Leavis armed himself with a secular theology that substituted literature for dogma in order to defend what was left of community and tradition in an epoch of massive and threatening change. I think that such an explanation

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<sup>45</sup> It must also be noted that, for Leavis, an organic community is also the material basis of a truly national literature. In his *Revaluation*, Leavis tells us that “the ideal (...) of a civilization in which Art and Nature, Beauty and Use, Industry and Decorum, should be reconciled, and humane culture, even in its most refined forms, be kept appropriately aware of its derivation from and dependence on the culture of the soil.” (Leavis, 1936: 80).

reveals only part of what is behind Leavis's strategic choice of 'the organic community' as a critical tool. What is left out is a more dialectical consideration of the relation between such a key concept in his work and its underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions. I shall return to this later on in my discussion.

The twentieth century, and more particularly the years after World War I, was for Leavis an era marked by the absence of meaning and direction. The irretrievable loss of any sort of 'organic community' and of the values which such a community should foster left humankind in a state of bewilderment and confusion. The poet and the critic, whose job was to mediate between the art and its public, could only hope to have a positive effect on our consciousness by "seriousness, (...) spiritual and moral intensity, and (...) resolute intelligence" (Leavis, 1959: 156). In this context, Leavis attributes these virtues to the T. S. Eliot of the *Waste Land*. This set of purely moral virtues was for Leavis what characterized all great literature and the critic's task – magisterially enacted by Leavis himself in those essays – was the elaboration of these moral concepts for the benefit of the educated public which wished, at one and the same time, to resist the banalization of values and to find a common code with the help of which a project of cultural resistance might be initiated.

#### 'SINCERITY' AS LITERARY VALUE

Besides seriousness, moral intensity and intelligence, there is another virtue which constitutes the hard core of Leavis's early moral criticism. This is the virtue of sincerity, which Leavis attributes to Hopkins, and for whose genius he tells us that it was "as much a matter of rare character, intelligence and sincerity as of technical skill". The way in which Leavis concludes his appraisal is very illuminating: "indeed, in his great poetry the distinction disappears; the technical triumph is a triumph of spirit. (ibid, 182)" In this sentence we are presented with what I think is the most central and indispensable element of Leavis's critical

practice: literature is to be valued if and only if behind its apparent beauty of form we are able to discern a moral significance that leads directly 'outside' literature to life itself.

Some further considerations on 'sincerity' are in order here since this concept plays a crucial role in Leavis's moral-critical terminology. 'Sincerity' was, for Leavis, the key term for the appraisal of poetic achievement. It was in fact a reworking of the Victorian term of the same name<sup>46</sup> with the emphasis now put not on the evaluable moral qualities of the individual, but on discernible qualities of the work itself. As a result it was now the work that embodied this virtue in its enactment of the individual poet's authentic experience and moral vision. Whereas the Victorian usage was always marked by the characteristic moralising tone of the era 'sincerity' was used by Leavis as an index of the virtues of 'disinterestedness' and 'impersonality' as these were inscribed in the poem itself. The shift was from the direct attribution of moral worth to the living author to a more indirect and ultimately always contestable relationship between the poet and the poem. If for the Victorians 'sincerity' was something that the aspiring author must try to achieve in his work by following his inner convictions without hesitation and with a noble disregard for the consequences, for Leavis 'sincerity' became a testament of the poem's high status as a privileged form of expression of the human experience. Now, it was the work that becomes the object of moral evaluation, although Leavis never ceased to insist that what was significant in literature was the fact that someone had willed that significance in the first place. Leavis used 'sincerity' as a compound term where there has been a fusion of the Arnoldian concept of 'disinterestedness' with Eliot's concept of 'impersonality', thus making it a more fitting critical tool than the historically obsolete Victorian term ever was. Having been infused with a more general and far-reaching meaning than its common usage allowed for 'sincerity' came to signify both a moral virtue and a technical achievement in poetic expression; a moral virtue because it indicated the truthful expression of feeling, personal experience and also, at the same time, a

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<sup>46</sup> See for example G. H. Lewes, *The Principle of Success in Literature* (1869).

technical achievement because it indicated a mastery of means, a higher organisation of the materials of language that produced a poem capable of containing this experience.

#### THE VALUE OF 'EXPERIENCE'

'Experience' as a critical concept is absolutely essential to Leavis's criticism. His view of literature is one that is primarily focused on individual experience and the complex processes through which such an experience is dramatized and made public by means of a specific literary form. However, 'experience' as a concept is notoriously vague and in order to understand the very specific inflections it acquires in Leavis's work we must pay attention to the contexts in which it appears. It is these contexts that indicate that what we find at work in Leavis's criticism is not merely a series of concepts but a tightly grouped cluster of certain rather loose and very evocative notions that may be characterized as conceptual structures. I believe that only as such structures do they lend themselves to any meaningful discussion. 'Experience' is good example as, by itself, it says so many things that it can hardly be called an analytical tool. Yet, when we read of Keats that he exhibits in his poetry "that strong grasp upon actualities – upon things outside himself, that firm sense of the solid world" (Leavis, 1936: 261) we see that the poet's experience is intimately related to his capacity of going beyond himself, that is, of him being 'impersonal' in his art while dealing with the 'actualities' of the world, something that evokes a sense of 'concreteness', another key concept in Leavis's criticism which I shall discuss later on. While still discussing Keats, Leavis, in a richly-textured and highly evocative passage, has this to say about the specific moral quality of Keats's poetry within the context of a Romanticism inimical to moral seriousness:

There is no afflatus here, no generous emotionality. The facts, the objects of contemplation, absorb the poet's attention completely; he has none left for his feelings as such. As a result, his response, his attitude, seems to us to inhere in the facts, and to have itself the autonomy of fact.

The strength that makes the sensuous Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* so different from the spiritual Shelley's *To a Skylark* - the grasp of the object, the firm sense of actuality, the character and critical intelligence implied (we have seen) in the artist's touch and his related command of total effect - now manifests itself in the field of tragic experience. His own acute and inescapable distresses, including the pain of watching helplessly the suffering of persons dear to him, he can, without feeling them the less, contemplate at the same time from (as it were) the outside, as objects, as facts and the contemplation of the inevitable and endless human suffering to which his more immediately personal experience leads him has a like impersonal strength. (Leavis, 1936: 270-71)

A great poet is one who gives his experience a poetic form that testifies to the his clear-sighted, principled, unsentimental and ultimately, although Leavis never uses that particular qualifying adjective, brave attitude towards life in general. In Leavis's reformed canon of English poetry – the novel would follow in the next decade – only a resolutely unsentimental, morally intelligent, anti-aestheticist attitude towards life makes any work qualify for inclusion in such a canon. Only a strong grasp of the objective and at the same time a respect for the irreducibility of the individual and the subjective can enable the poet to capture the elusive moral quality of life which, according to Leavis, inheres in that precise dialectical relationship. Finally, the 'impersonal strength' of the poetic utterance in dealing with 'the inevitable and endless human suffering', this moral wisdom that the poem communicated to us, is, as a critical observation, quite indicative, I think, of a quasi-theological quality of Leavis's critical practice. In this passage all the crucial elements of Leavis's moral criticism fall into place and evoke a critical intention which is programmatically trying to establish the ethical criticism of literature, in this case of poetry, as the only 'legitimate' form of culturally significant criticism.

#### 'MATURITY' AS A MORAL CONCEPT

‘Experience’ as a constituent part of Leavis’s conceptual arsenal is closely related to the concept of ‘life’, often referred to by Leavis through the evaluative usage of ‘vitality’ and other cognate words. Before I enter into the discussion of ‘life’, I would like to draw attention to another value-laden concept that Leavis makes use of: that of ‘maturity’. The context within which such a concept is employed is mainly the *Great Tradition* and the other works of Leavis’s middle period such as *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*. ‘Maturity’ came to fulfil the function that ‘sincerity’ fulfilled in his criticism of poetry in the earlier years of his career. Although both these terms retain a great deal in common between them there is shift in the emphasis implied by each. If ‘sincerity’ in its usage in Leavis’s criticism is a feature that combines the formal aspect with the moral one then ‘maturity’, the term that Leavis used for his criticism of the novel, is evidence of a shift of focus. ‘Maturity’, for Leavis, is the state that a certain writer reaches when he is able to present us with all the complexities of real life without hesitation and without any unnecessary embellishments. It is worth remembering that, in this case also, Leavis is not so much interested in appraising the individual ‘behind’ the text, but in confirming a quality that is exhibited by the text itself. The importance now is that this new term is conceived purely in terms of the moral quality of the text. The technical aspect of novelistic composition is now of secondary importance; it exists not autonomously, but only in virtue of its close affinity with, and structural dependence on, the moral aspect. Commenting on Jane Austin’s *Emma*, Leavis formulates his argument in the following way:

As a matter of fact, when we examine the formal perfection of *Emma*, we find that it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist’s peculiar interest in life. Those who suppose it to be an ‘aesthetic matter’, a beauty of ‘composition’ that is combined, miraculously, with ‘truth to life’, give no adequate reason for the view that *Emma* is a great novel, no intelligent account of its perfection of form. It is in the same way true of the other great English novelists that their interest in their art gives them the opposite of an affinity with Pater and George Moore; it is, brought to an intense focus, an unusually developed life. For,



far from having anything of Flaubert's disgust or disdain or boredom, they are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity. (Leavis, 1962: 17)

'Maturity' also signifies a move away from the consensus that a term like 'sincerity' could be predicated upon. In other words if the semantic content of 'sincerity' can still be agreed upon, even with all the qualifications that such a charged term obviously entails, the case with a term like 'maturity' is rather different. The problematic connotations of its common usage haunt its more specialised application in Leavis's literary criticism. As Michael Bell has noted, the term in question is deliberately circular, a fact that makes it problematic as a critical term because "it is at once too empty of specific meaning while being ideologically loaded. It carries, we might say, the maximum evaluative charge with the minimum agreed, identifiable reference" (Bell, 1998: 98) And yet, as I shall argue later on, by virtue of his specific approach to literature and culture, this is exactly what Leavis is compelled to do in every instance of his critical practice.

Leavis first uses 'maturity' in his *Great Tradition*, the book that signals his shift both from a criticism of poetry to a criticism of the novel<sup>47</sup> and his attempt to propose a new canon for the study of English literature. It is by following closely the deployment of this concept in this book that we may clearly identify its specificity. Speaking of Jane Austin, the first in a series of great masters of English literature, Leavis says that "what she brought from her Evangelical background was a radically reverent attitude towards life, a profound seriousness of the kind that is a first condition of any real intelligence..." The phrase 'profound seriousness' is of particular interest to my discussion here and the key to understanding the

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<sup>47</sup> A shift that was not accidental but rather an almost desperate attempt of Leavis to find a 'total sense of life' in a genre and during a period, after World War II, when such an integral totality was manifestly absent from the real world. As long as he believed that a 'public sphere' could make its appearance even in the confined space of the university and therefore a 'total sense of life' could be communicated within it poetry, a genre notoriously hard to decode morally, could play its role. However, after the disillusionment the turn to such an inclusive genre such as the novel marks the desire to find an art form that can manage to preserve the idea of wholeness and moral imagination.

distinctive quality of the concept of 'maturity' as a value-judgement. In itself such an expression may appear the least equipped to offer any real advantages to anyone wishing to decipher 'maturity's' real meaning since 'seriousness' is hardly an easily identifiable quality. Yet, later on in the book, in his discussion of George Elliot Leavis tells us that she "has too full and strong sense of the reality, she sees too clearly and understandingly, sees with a judging vision that relates everything to her profoundest moral experience: her full living sense of value is engaged, and sensitively responsive" (Leavis, 1962: 102). Now 'maturity' becomes a more clearly delineated quality, more like a virtue, that is something perceivable and therefore potentially attributable to others. This virtue, the empathy with the world, the clear, earnest and uncompromising perception of life is now exemplified by the specific quality of a 'judging vision', a vision that relates world and inner experience, the phenomenal world with human significance: it is a vision that not only sees life but invests in life as well. Such a vision is mature because it can embrace a totality and not a series of fragments. It is also an intelligent vision "precisely because [Eliot] cares for the 'reason' of things (...) she can render the aspect [of them] so vividly; her intelligence informs her perception and her visual imagination" (ibid, 130). The 'reason' of things is a crucial aspect of this totality, it is in fact the prerequisite for such a conception of the world. Leavis concludes this comment by declaring that "(t)he vividness of the rendering is significance" (ibid, 130). Virtue lies in both the formal aspect *and* the content of an author's work. In fact the formal aspect is worthy of praise only because it conveys a significant content and a content is significant if it deals with certain aspects of life without any hesitation or evasive manoeuvres.

Referring to Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* Leavis comments that "James's lack of specificity favours an evasiveness, and the evasiveness, if at all closely questioned, yields inconsistency of a kind that partly empties the theme of *The Portrait of a Lady* of moral substance" (ibid, 127). A clear vision can only be praiseworthy if it is direct as well. It can lift a work of art to higher levels of moral worthiness only in as far as it does not allow itself to

settle for the obviousness of the immediately perceptible but rather probe what is there in front of it with an engaged and yet disinterested seriousness of intent. 'Maturity' then comes to imply both engagement and disinterestedness, an opening up to the world and at the same an attitude to life untainted by any sectarian interest.

This double gesture which reconfirms Leavis's debt to Matthew Arnold is also an index of his intention to preserve the critical quality inherent in great art while at the same time disabling this very art to fulfil other functions that would enable it to play the role not of a sanctuary but of a battleground. Leavis in fact wished for the cultural education of an enlightened minority which would eventually educate a wider public so that sectarian interests and conflict would eventually wither away. In his opinion, in order for that to happen one would need a training in good literature and by extension in good life, an *education sentimentale* that, taking one possible cue from George Elliot, would engage with "the weakness and ordinariness of human nature" and would not find it "contemptible, or show either animus or self-deceiving indulgence towards it" (ibid, 139).

'Maturity' then becomes an even more rich concept by virtue of its implying a higher conception of life, a worldview devoid of the pettiness and the one-sidedness which characterize those unaffected by 'culture' and therefore incapable of a finer living. It is also an infallible sign of a generous response to life and most crucially to life as represented or rather enacted in the literary text. If great literature is, almost by definition, mature then great criticism is mature as well since its main function is to respond as fully as possible to the text. This full response, one that entails a great degree of independence and responsibility by the critic, is a sign of life, a life that asserts itself in the relationship between the text and critic and ultimately in all those who will allow themselves to be educated by that criticism. It is 'maturity' as exemplified in great literature that will, among other things to be sure, enable its readers to reach the consensus that Leavis tacitly accepted as the basis of any true act of criticism.

'Maturity' in common with 'sincerity' both take shape in Leavis's early critical work in an era when modernism, weary of the "sentimentality, moral rhetoric and the cult of personality" as "possible corruptions of clear thinking and true feeling" (Bell, 1988: 66) attempts a grand reformulation of the first principles as it were of any real art and criticism. Among these first principles it is 'impersonality' that is the most important for my discussion. It is the concept of impersonality, presented in Eliot's seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as something that is not a "turning loose of emotions" but rather an "escape from emotions", not the "expression of personality but an escape from personality" (Eliot, 1950: 10-11) that makes 'sincerity' first and then 'maturity' such potent critical tools. Whereas the Victorians would relate literary value and moral integrity in such a way as to regard the character of the individual author as the sole determinant of the attributable value, Leavis and the other modernists dissociate the individual from the text only to invest the latter with all the metaphysical ambiguities that were, in earlier times, attributed to the former. Now, the individual author is almost entirely an aspect of the work, in the sense that it is of importance because of his works and the amount of fine, concentrated effort that he has put into those works. Ultimately it is the texts that matter since it is only with them that we engage; it is they which stand in front of us, material traces of a human intellect and bearers of meanings that may affect us and future readers as well. As a consequence of this literature assumes responsibilities that were until that point scarcely if at all attributed to it. If 'maturity' is what distinguishes the great literary works of art from all the others, and if literature is, by virtue of its specificity the only art that can be so full of significance for us then it follows that literature – in Leavis's case invariably great literature – may now be regarded as a great educating force, the exemplification of what is best in a long tradition of thought and life. If 'maturity' is now a virtue of texts and not only of human beings then it follows that literature may fulfil its educating function by assuming the role of the keeper of the tradition, of truth and value in an era when the industry of mass entertainment seemed

capable of colonizing both the free time and the psyche of the masses. Leavis wishes literature to play a defensive role, against what he perceives as the main obstacle to human realization: mass civilisation. Therefore, he endows literature and criticism with powers so great so as to be able to guarantee success in the face of a great adversary. 'Maturity' is one of those powers, in fact it is the index of their efficacy. For if literature, in its great moments, cannot carry within it the possibility of another, better future by being at one and the same time an index of both the missed opportunities and the possible alternatives, then its positing as a great oppositional force to mass civilisation will prove to be nothing more than a narcissistic posture. 'Mature' literature rescues life from oblivion and creates the possibilities of life in the present. It focuses on what is important by leaving out all that can distract the reader. It encourages informed choice and a discerning eye for real significance. It promises so much because, *qua* great literature, it is never evasive, never frivolous, never merely charming; the perfect antithesis of Hollywood romance and populist journalism, two archetypal *bêtes noires* for Leavis and the Scrutiny group.

There are many possible objections to such bold pronouncements. The more common objection is directed against the lack of specificity that a term like 'maturity' implies. My view is that this is true but also not very illuminating. I believe that this lack of specificity, as I shall argue later on, is an integral and unavoidable feature of such a conception of culture and society. What I find more interesting is the specificity of such a notion in Leavis's work. I have tried to throw some light on what I believe is the semantic content and the connotations of that term yet its function in Leavis's critical system will only be understood in close relation with the other key concepts that inform his thinking.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF 'CONCRETENESS'

One of these concepts that we find in all his critical works is the concept of 'concreteness'. 'Concreteness' is, for Leavis, the other main virtue of all good literature and

of all criticism worthy of its name. Its application is different in each case in that in literature 'concreteness' is exemplified by the focus on the identifiable and clearly distinguishable complexities of the adventures of a human soul thrown into the world. In criticism, it is exemplified by the insistence on the individual and not the generic qualities of a certain work. Most importantly, it is exemplified by the unwillingness of the critic to paraphrase the literary work of art by employing a certain language and a certain methodology that come as it were from outside the proper domain of literary studies<sup>48</sup>. 'Concreteness' is in many ways a concept complementary to 'maturity'. If the latter signifies a higher level of both literature and life the former makes this virtue even more specific. It is not anymore just a question of a comprehensive outlook but rather a question of attending closely to detail, to what makes something distinct, different and ultimately significant *per se*. In "Under which King, Bezonian?", one of his seminal articles in the thirties and one of his most serious attempts to deal with Marxism, Leavis writes: "To be concerned as *Scrutiny* is, for literary criticism is to be vigilant and scrupulous about the relation between words and the concrete" (Leavis, 1933: 171). The 'concrete' is here put forward in a programmatic fashion as an index of an attentive critical practice, one that is sensitive to the specificity of its object, one that refrains from 'translating' the literary work into something that it does not and cannot allow for. To be attentive to what makes a poem or novel a distinct piece of work is to be sensitive to the most fundamental quality of literature, namely its capacity to affect, inspire, and educate by means of presenting in a particular way a particular instance of the greater totality that is life. Each work demands of us an openness not dissimilar to the openness we ought to have towards other human beings. For Leavis each work comes to us as a stranger that asks, if not for a wholehearted acceptance, then at least for respect for its being what it is. Yet this is still

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<sup>48</sup> His exchange with Rene Wellek, the renowned literary critic, in the pages of *Scrutiny* in the thirties and his much later exchange with the philosopher Michael Tanner in the seventies both show to what extent his empiricist, anti-theoretical approach remained unaltered through the years.

not the whole story. What remains for it to be complete is to establish also 'concreteness' as a virtue of texts, as well as of critics. Referring to Conrad's *Nostromo* Leavis writes:

The impressiveness is not a matter of any profundity of search into human experience, or any explorative subtlety in the analysis of human behaviour. It is matter rather of the firm and vivid concreteness with which the representative attitudes and motives are realized, and the rich economy of the pattern that plays them off against one another. (Leavis, 1962: 215-216)

What makes Conrad's work great is the author's attendance to the particular and not its adherence to any grand analytical scheme or over-arching ideology. Leavis does not seem too concerned by the fact that any 'rich economy of pattern' that plays one element off against another seems to imply something more complex, something that his empiricist attitude towards narrativity fails to perceive. Leavis valorises the attendance to detail, to the specificity of human experience and life because he is ideologically predisposed to attribute value primarily to the individual, conceived here as the centre from which life emanates and to which life ultimately returns in the form of moral gratification. Leavis sees value neither in the grand 'sociological' gesture of depicting reality in broad strokes in order to focus on its structural characteristics nor in the 'psychological' gesture of depicting reality through the sensitive probing of the inner secrets of the human soul. When it comes to the crucial question of motives Leavis explains:

Clearly, Conrad's study of motives, and of the relation between the material and the spiritual, doesn't depend for its impressiveness on any sustained analytic exhibition of the inner complexities of the individual psyche. The impressiveness lies in the vivid reality of the things we are made to see and hear, and the significance they get from their relations in a highly organized and vividly realized whole. (ibid, 217).

Again it is a question of a totality that comes as a result of being sensitive to the concrete particulars. It is a totality – not a term Leavis uses – that we apprehend as ultimate knowledge, a kind of epiphany brought about by the masterful organization of fictional materials in the work of art. To be mature in literature is to be attentive to the *differentia specifica* of concrete human experience, it is to be truthful to life and respectful of real value. It is also – I might add – to be somewhat perversely ignorant of the fact that there are deeper structures which are not only discernable and potentially identifiable in any narrative but, more importantly, that their foregrounding and elucidation is a legitimate concern for literary criticism.

However, what Leavis tries to achieve is not merely to draw our attention to what empiricists have always claimed. Leavis wishes to make a point relevant to literature and not philosophy and that point is the question of judgement. It is critical judgement that needs to be rethought and reformulated and to that end the notion of ‘concreteness’ is put to use in order to put forward the idea that “judgement is not a matter of abstractions”, but that “it involves particular immediate acts of choice” and that these acts “do not advance the business of judgement in any serious sense unless there has been a real and appropriate responsiveness to the thing offered”. Without such responsiveness one is presumably vulnerable to either intellectualism or over-simplification. Leavis concludes by stating that “without a free and delicate receptivity to fresh experience, whatever the criterion alleged, there is no judging, but merely negation” (Leavis, 1986: 47). It is negation that the critic needs to protect himself from. If history, in Leavis’s eyes, generates despair and nihilism seems a concomitant evil of such a human failure then it is in literature and in the proper way of dealing with it that we may lay our hopes for a better alternative. If capitalism debases experience by commodifying it then it is the attentiveness to true human experience as



depicted in literature – and not even the whole of literature but only a very small part of it – that will constitute the strategic defence of those who are receptive to the new gospel<sup>49</sup>.

The shift from poetry to prose that is manifested by the publication of the canon-setting *The Great Tradition* has the effect of introducing into the work of Leavis certain new concepts which are called upon to provide the critical functions that other concepts provided earlier. I have already discussed one of these concepts, namely ‘maturity’ and it is now time to discuss what is, in my view at least, one of the most central and at the same time one of the most unspecifiable concepts in Leavis’s criticism.

#### THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘LIFE’

‘Life’ is a concept which has a dual application: a literary and an extraliterary one. As a distinctly literary quality ‘life’ is the positive index of a literary work’s achievement. It connotes the ‘disinterested’ expression of ‘concrete experience’ of a ‘mature’ poet or writer in the literary work of art. As such it entails the lack of emotionalism, the presence of spiritual and intellectual integrity and the affirmation of the complex specificity of objective reality. ‘Life’, in this sense in Leavis’s criticism, is the mark of a felicitous encounter between the consciousness of the poet/writer and the external world. The direct and unsentimental articulation of ‘experience’ by means of a specifically literary use of language is, for Leavis, what ‘animates’ a literary work, it is in other words what gives it life. Commenting on Wordsworth’s poetry Leavis says that it makes us aware of a certain human naturalness by its being “realized in a mode central and compelling enough to enforce the bearing of poetry upon life, the significance of this poetry for actual living” (Leavis, 1936: 170). In Leavis’s critical scheme bad poetry is a lifeless and irrelevant poetry. When there is no truth, integrity

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<sup>49</sup> I use the word ‘gospel’ because the clerical fervour of Leavis’s pronouncements, especially on language and culture, all too evident. In support of my view I may enlist Bernard Bergonzi who has argued that “(f)or Leavis, the values on which civilization depended were far too important to be called ‘literary’. They were not to be called unqualifiedly ‘religious’ either, but they had a religious weight and seriousness. Literature, the right literature, was indeed a form of sacred scripture, and the critic and teacher was a hierophantic interpreter.” (Bergonzi, 1990: 51-52)

and intellectual seriousness life cannot flourish. In its place we have rhetoric, emotionalism and ultimately a sensationalist attitude towards the world that negates any positive moral qualities literature may have.

'Life' in Leavis's criticism was what enabled him to pursue his moral criticism more fully although not always more convincingly. If 'life' is assumed to be what is celebrated by the positivity of any artistic expression and if such positivity is only attestable where there is emotional and spiritual wholeness and intellectual integrity then a justified conclusion may be that the moral value of literature is the integration of all the disparate and often antithetical elements (emotional, spiritual, intellectual – and social) into one finely organised totality<sup>50</sup> which restructures them in such a way as to enable us to see clearly and ultimately understand the world referred to by this totality, the literary work of art. In discussing the art of Lawrence, Leavis, who by this time had come to consider him as the epitome of all things positive and life-affirming, announces that:

... the dramatic poem unfolds – or builds up – with an astonishing fertility of life. This life, so much of which commands the imagination at the first encounter, is all significant life; not a scene, episode, image or touch but forwards the organized development of the themes. (Leavis, 1955: 25)

The phrase 'significant life' is an indication that 'life', for Leavis, is not merely an affirmation of the obvious fact of mere physical existence, but an affirmation of an ideal state of existence, both physical and spiritual, of living consciously in a world full of meaning, in short of living well. There is of course a more restricted usage of the term in his literary criticism where 'life' is used in order to convey not only the meanings of both 'fullness' and

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<sup>50</sup> This is also Vincent Buckley's view: "[According to Leavis, poetry's] moral value resides in the 'emotional quality' which, when integrated with the workings of intelligence, is the index of spiritual vitality" (Buckley, 1959: 176).

‘positivity’ but also, more implicitly, a state of moral health. In one of his less than flattering remarks about Henry James, Leavis comments:

The obvious constataion to start from, when the diagnosis of his queer development is in question, is that he suffered from being too much a professional novelist: being a novelist came to be too large a part of his living; that is, he did not live enough. His failure in this respect suggests, no doubt, some initial deficiency in him. (Leavis, 1962: 189)

In this passage we are given certain clues that may lead us to a more precise understanding of ‘life’. ‘Professionalism’, for Leavis a perversion of the social organisation of human labour, is obviously not something that enhances ‘life’ since it focuses on the technical aspect of the process of labour thus neglecting what is of essence to it. In Leavis’s view the work ought to be an integral part of a greater totality; part of an organic whole within the context of which human labour can be endowed with human value and significance. The manifest absence of anything that relates work with man in a context of a commonly shared system of values is thus considered a symptom of a fundamental lack: a moral deficiency. In a slightly different context Leavis remarks on the importance of “the trained non-specialist mind that, while qualified by its training to represent humane tradition as a living force” would, at the same time, possess “enough understanding of the modern world and the complexities of civilization to act as a kind of co-ordinating consciousness” (Leavis, 1986A: 176). Again we see the binary opposition between ‘humane tradition as a living force’ and a ‘specialism’ which was, for Leavis, unable to fulfil the function of the ‘co-ordinating consciousness’. For him, whatever belonged to the technologico-industrial universe, be it material or ideological, of contemporary capitalism was constitutionally ill-fitted for anything even remotely connected with ‘life’.

In certain other of its uses ‘life’ became an all-encompassing notion that covered everything that was pre-legitimised as positive and culturally desirable. Remaining faithful to

the Arnoldian position that equated literary criticism with criticism of life Leavis attempts to re-articulate the relations between literature and life at a time when all that was taken for granted during Arnold's lifetime was threatened by profound changes both political and cultural. Faced with the increasing pressure for specialization in the Humanities and the effects of the then new welfare state, one of the most important for our discussion here being the widening of access to tertiary education, Leavis resorts to a mystification of what, in his mind, was the ultimate counter-measure to the increasingly fierce attacks of 'civilization': the life-affirming qualities of literature. In order to understand the particular qualities of the notion of 'life' in Leavis's critical work we must consider it as being structurally related to two other concepts: 'minority' and 'culture'. It is as part of this cluster of terms that 'life' begins to appear as something more specific than it initially appears.

#### CULTURAL MINORITIES AND THE QUESTION OF FINE LIVING

In the beginning of "Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture" we read that

In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is (apart from cases of the simple and familiar) only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment. They are still a small minority, though a larger one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgment by genuine personal response. The accepted valuations are a kind of paper currency based upon a very small proportion of gold. *To the state of such a currency the possibilities of fine living at any time bear a close relation.* (Leavis 1933: 13-14) (italics mine)

It is in this passage that the Leavisian conception of 'life' and more specifically 'finer living' becomes explicit. 'Life' is not merely a passive state of affairs but the active reorganisation of elements, according to a specific cultural and ultimately political process. The economic metaphor used by Leavis cannot conceal that it is essentially a question about

a desired political order. If 'civilisation' – for Leavis merely another word for industrial capitalism – is threatening 'culture' then the only defence, for lack of any other alternative, is the return to a sociocultural order where a select minority, a clerisy in other words, is responsible for the preservation of the 'fine life'. Precisely what Leavis had in mind is hard to tell. If 'fine life' is to be taken as a present-day version of the alleged way of life of the organic community, then we could easily object to the non-feasibility of any such proposal. Leavis anticipated that objection so he construed this 'fine life' as a potentiality, in other words, as an object of desire feasible to the extent that culture will be regulated by those most suitable for that function. Yet, given the absence of any such trained elite it is very hard to specify what 'fine life' will look like as both its content and its form can only be agreed upon by those who have the necessary (educational and moral) qualifications. Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether such a social order is ethically or politically justifiable we can, for the time being, concentrate on the issue of determining the kind of individual that possesses such qualities as to be eligible for inclusion in the regulating elite. For Leavis these are the individuals who are "capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment". These gifted individuals seem to just appear in the world, their capacities and acquired aptitudes never questioned as to their provenance. It seems that they are more a product of good fortune than class privilege. Leavis seems unwilling to accept that this might be a legitimate objection to his proposition since his whole cultural theory is structurally dependent on the repression of such a paradox. Where do the individuals capable of deciding what culture should be for the rest of the world come from? Leavis is embarrassingly silent when it comes to specifying the details of the social characteristics of the 'conscious minority'. I shall return to this issue later on in this chapter.

The more Leavis refuses to assume an explicit – both theoretical and political – position vis-à-vis the historical reality of his time the more he is compelled by the logic of his own world-view to construct a mythic notional universe where 'vitality' substitutes all other

notions. Such a conception of life is devoid of any concern about the material presuppositions of (actual) life. Its sole function is to provide an open-ended set of qualities that are supposedly the indicators of any culture worthy of distinction: truthfulness, a sense of cultural memory, sensitivity to the concreteness of human experience, fine-tuned moral intuition. This litany of high ideals provides us with some indication of the semantic complexity of the notion of 'life' in Leavis's work. It also gives us an indication of what is missing from that notion: an awareness of the historical and psychological complexity, a more positive attitude towards abstraction and theoretical reasoning, a sensitivity to the material necessities and not only to the spiritual or intellectual ones; all these are persistently absent from any combination of things valorised by the term 'life' in its long history in Leavis's work. Although Leavis makes abundantly clear that, in his view, literature in its best instances is an affirmation of life, the precise content of that notion seems to depend on already accepted definitions and evaluative judgements and at a deeper level on certain ideologically-charged cultural and political convictions which are never explicitly acknowledged.

#### THE POLITICS OF THE MORAL IMAGINATION

All these concepts I have just examined constitute only certain focal points through which the articulation of a moral problematic is made possible. But these concepts and their ideological attributes do not exhaust all the possibilities that this problematic engenders. They are, in Leavis's own work, simply the most convenient and historically pertinent tools in the process of articulating a discourse, that due to its structural limitations, can do little else but choose these concepts instead of other perhaps more effective ones. But what did these structural limitations really consist of? The answer lies, I believe, in the historical conditions that determined their existence and also in the reworking of these conditions at the level of ideology. I referred earlier to the absolute dichotomy that came to characterize

the relation between 'culture' and 'civilisation' in Leavis's conception of these two terms. This assumed irreconcilable difference, both essential and radical, led to a substantial modification of the notion of 'culture' and of everything that was considered to properly belong to it. This modification mainly consisted in the conceptualization of 'culture' as a place of resistance and defence against the dehumanising process of 'civilisation'. Needless to say, that was not an entirely new approach to cultural politics<sup>51</sup>, but it was an important one because it marked the first consistent application of the culture vs. civilization argument in Britain in modern times. In addition to that, the determinants of those human values sanctioned by tradition were to be found in a particular aspect of culture whose name was English literature. The question that first arises from any such considerations is the exact import of all the terms used in the discussion.

One of the characteristics of Leavis's cultural politics was the existence of a circular problematic. One of the instances of such a problematic is to be found in "The Idea of a University" where Leavis asserted that

'Humane tradition' may seem a vague concept. I don't think that an attempt to define it by enumeration of its contents would help. It seems to me better to point to English literature, which is unquestionably and productively 'there', and to suggest that the 'literary tradition' that this unquestionable existence justifies us in speaking of might also be called a vague concept. (Leavis, 1948: 17)

Although this is from an essay written during the forties, it is indicative of a conceptual strategy that marked Leavis's thought from the start. This strategy consisted of referring one basic concept to another thus creating a vicious circle that left all the urgent questions unanswered (English literature being 'there' but where exactly? for whom? and to what

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<sup>51</sup> An excellent introduction to the cultural politics of the culture vs. civilization thesis is to be found in Mulhern, 2000, especially the first chapter entitled "Against Mass Civilization".

purpose?) and yet at the same time producing a discourse that seemed to be demanding not any rational argumentation but the necessity of a certain leap of faith. This had the effect of presenting 'culture' as an organic whole where everything acquires substance by its implicit association with the other elements which in turn acquire substance from their association with other elements and so forth. Of course there are other more charitable interpretations of Leavis's methodology. Michael Bell commenting primarily on Leavis's specifically literary critical methodology says that "in sum, the openness of Leavis's central terms is a way of pointing up such significances in literary texts without translating them into another, inappropriate discourse. It is an attempt to preserve the integrity of the text while analysing it." (Bell, 1988: 10). The same could just as easily be said regarding his more general terms. Yet the fact remains that any such 'openness' does little to conceal the critic's unwillingness to account for some of his fundamental presuppositions. The integrity of a text or a more inclusive cultural formation is not compromised by conceptual analysis unless the latter is somehow presented as a substitute for the former. This was Leavis's own often stated reason for not attempting to theorise. However, this persistent lack of a second-order theoretical elaboration not only betrays an uneasiness about the 'hidden truths' as it were of his own discourse, but is also responsible for the impression that is often left after reading some of his critical works that the force of the argument lays more in the insistent repetition of the argument itself and the use of the lengthy quotation than in the persuasive theoretical elaboration of that argument.<sup>52</sup> This is a space closed to all outsiders, since anyone not willing to read literature or interpret it along the lines of a self-referential explanatory code is evidently not a member of the minority which can do so; and therefore this person is by definition an outsider. So 'culture' in Leavis's account becomes a seemingly self-enclosed, self-determined space where membership is determined by the fact that you are 'born' into it in the first place. If there are any questions about the matter they can only be raised inside

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<sup>52</sup> A point made by virtually all his critics. One instance where this particular point is discussed in detail is Bernard Heyl's "The Absolutism of F. R. Leavis", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 13:2 (1954), 249-255.



this community, based on a pre-existing consensus as to the main principles and values at stake.

I referred earlier in this chapter to the implicit consensus that Leavis's criticism is predicated upon. Leavis believed that all successful criticism should always imply the feasibility of a seemingly simple statement: "This is so, is it not?" To such a statement one should ideally respond along the lines of 'yes, but...'; with this qualified response a meaningful conversation could then take place and, consequently, a society of equals could assert itself in the process.<sup>53</sup> Perry Anderson has remarked that "the central idea of this epistemology (...) demands, however, one crucial precondition: a shared, stable system of beliefs and values", since in their absence "no loyal exchange or report is possible" (Anderson, 1968: 52). It is this shared system of beliefs and values that Leavis tries to establish, if not as a historically demonstrable reality then as an ideal, a guiding principle. This is one reason why he needs the concept of 'organic society' in order to support his critical practice by constituting the latter as an enactment of the special character of human interaction in the former. Thus criticism becomes a practice of salvaging value and perpetuating the hope for a better life. For that Leavis had to presuppose a culturally and also morally unified group of people that alone could – by virtue of their 'conversation' – preserve the essential qualities of a long lost way of life. Anderson has also remarked that Leavis's method "presupposes, in fact, a morally and culturally unified audience" in whose absence "his epistemology disintegrates" (Anderson, 1968: 52).

This desire for an implicit consensus is what animates the notion of the "organic community" so often used as an illustration of what is culturally and socially desirable. This validating reference to the 'organic community' is essential to his project since it fulfils a

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<sup>53</sup> In "Valuation in Criticism" (1986) Leavis writes: "What, of its nature, the critical activity aims at, in fact, is an exchange, a collaborative exchange, a corrective and creative interplay of judgments. For though my judgment asks to be confirmed appeals for concurrence in a recognition that the thing is so, the response I expect at best will be of the form, 'Yes, but -', the 'but' standing for qualifications, corrections, shifts of emphasis, refinements, additions. The process of personal judgment from its very outset, of course, is in subtle ways essentially collaborative, as any thinking is - as any use of the language in which one thinks and expresses one's thoughts must be. But the functioning of criticism demands a fully overt kind of collaboration." (Leavis, 1974: 277-278).

function that is of the highest importance. This function is dual in the sense that it provides his criticism with a specific historical narrative and also gives it a moral centre, a moral imperative that conditions by its centrality and importance the other more peripheral elements. This moral centre is the valorisation of a society in which there was no division between 'low' or popular and 'high' or sophisticated culture. Although the existence of any such society is not a matter that is so unequivocally demonstrable the importance of such an evidently ideological construct is that it functions so as to provide Leavis's cultural discourse with a certain degree of ideological cohesion.

It is also the ideal – and highly idealistic – philosophy of history for any cultural politics that refuses to acknowledge the importance of politics and the immanent contradictions in all social formations. This refusal is what creates the necessity of a strong moral centre. It is 'morality' that is traditionally the most effective substitute for politics and therefore it is the one conceptual resource that one is almost instinctively driven to utilise in the absence of any real political problematic. Thus 'culture' is conceived as being part of the domain of the *moral* which now effectively substitutes almost entirely the domain of the *political*. In other words, when the positing of 'culture' and 'civilisation' is such as to preclude any political consideration for action the only viable alternative is to polarise the two terms in such a way as to have the positive one – 'culture' – full of moral significance and potential while having the negative term – 'civilisation' signifying the exact opposite.

For Leavis, literature is the bearer of all significant cultural values, and where the true locus of resistance lies. Francis Mulhern has noted that this conviction in the power of literature "was a distinctive compound discourse whose relation to politics was peculiarly intangible: the 'claims of politics' seemed almost obsolete in the case of a discourse on literature that was by its nature exclusively competent to determine certain fundamental social needs and realities, which performed a unique and indispensable political function simply by being itself." (Mulhern, 1979: 217) Literature then becomes the sacred word and by

logical necessity the university the only place that is capable of reproducing the conditions of its existence. This again creates a series of paradoxes. The animosity with which Leavis was treated during his career is well documented<sup>54</sup> as is his acute disillusionment towards the end of his career with the state of affairs in British academia. Therefore it becomes, at least on the surface, even more difficult to understand Leavis's desire to invest with such significance the one place that proved to be so hostile to his views and practices. Yet, there are reasons other than those related to Leavis's biography that make his choice seem strange. Certain, mainly historical, reasons are far more important. Universities were one of the institutions that were – like so many others – severely affected by the great changes that took place during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Vulnerable to external pressures mainly for financial reasons and ideologically complicit with the status quo, universities would hardly be seen as the most strategically sound choice in order to organize a cultural resistance. But Leavis had no other alternative. Having cancelled politics out and consequently having deprived himself of any space where politics could be carried out, he could not organize his cultural resistance anywhere else but the academia. For him, universities represented the only remaining institutions that could be both effective because of their still widely accepted importance as cultural centres and also for being congenial to a cultural politics devoid of any explicit political consideration. It comes as no surprise then that Leavis asserted that the aim of the university conceived as the organising centre of 'culture' is "to produce the 'educated man' – the man of humane culture who is equipped to be intelligent and responsible about the problems of contemporary civilization." (Leavis, 1948: 29-30)

To produce the 'educated man' can hardly be considered the remedy for the ills of 'civilisation' and Leavis certainly did not believe so. He did though believe in the paramount importance of education – essentially conceived as moral and cultural education – in

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<sup>54</sup> The entirety of his biographies, for instance, literary or otherwise. The most detailed in terms of contextual information is Ian MacKillop's *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, (London: Penguin, 1995).

effecting any change in the world outside, a world external to the proper preoccupations of 'culture' and yet unavoidably there in all its stubborn materiality. The perceived externality of this world and everything that pertained to it – administration, policy-making, etc. – was a direct result of the conceptual strategy I discussed earlier. There are many places in his writings where Leavis's attitude towards the world and the relationship of the individual with it is explicitly formulated. One of the most illustrative is to be found in the article "Literature and Society", later collected in *The Common Pursuit* (1952), where Leavis elucidates some of the fundamental difference between his method and the Marxist one by asserting that

The ways in which it [Eliot's and by implication Leavis's own way of thinking] is at odds with Marxist theories of culture are obvious. It stresses, not economic and material determinants, but intellectual and spiritual, so implying a different conception from the Marxist of the relation between the present of society and the past, and a different conception of society. It assumes that, enormously – no one will deny it – as material conditions count, there is a certain measure of spiritual autonomy in human affairs, and that human intelligence, choice and will do really and effectively operate, expressing an inherent human nature. There is a human nature – that is how, from the present point of view, we take the stress as falling; a human nature, of which an understanding is of primary importance to students of society and politics. (Leavis, 1952: 184)

There may be little disagreement as to the importance of a precise definition of the concept of 'human nature', a task still very much urgent today as it was in the 1930s when this article first appeared in *Scrutiny*. But what concerns us here is the phrase 'a certain measure of spiritual autonomy' which is another way of saying that in the absence of any dialectical understanding of the relations between the human soul and material reality, that is between the individual and the world, 'spiritual autonomy' is the only thing that can legitimize a moral as opposed to a political problematic. In another earlier article under the title "Restatement for Critics", later collected in *For Continuity* (1933), Leavis made the point

even more explicit by focusing on the ontological presuppositions of his method: “(w)e [The contributors to *Scrutiny*] assume an ‘inner human nature’ and our recognition that it may be profoundly affected by the ‘economic process’ persuades us it must rally, gather its resources and start training itself for its ultimate responsibility at once.” (Leavis, 1933: 188). This essentialist ontology is the ideal basis of an idealistic method which is exemplified somewhat ambivalently in the phrase ‘ultimate responsibility’. This idealistic method results in the dissolution of politics as a practical, ends-and-means-oriented activity thus producing the effect first at the level of theory and consequently at the level of practice of a split in the conceptual grasp of the political. This split makes Leavis, as well as the rest of the *Scrutiny* group, regard politics as essentially consisting of two aspects. The first aspect is the technical one and this is the realm of professional politicians and administrators and as such it belongs to ‘civilization’ rather than ‘culture’. The other aspect is the moral one and this is the realm of culture and therefore the only legitimate concern for Leavis.<sup>55</sup> This moral aspect of politics is what Leavis pursues as a complementary end in his writings. Being compelled by his own initial assumptions to engage always with the social aspect of cultural phenomena, and being equally compelled by the very same assumptions to keep a safe distance from a politics of revolutionary theory and praxis Leavis was bound to reinvent politics as moral activity.

According to Mulhern

First, politics was now fractured into administration – the technical business of government – and ethics: political analysis now turned on the moral evaluation of individual political agents. At the same time, the moral development of the individual became the supreme ‘political’ question, and accordingly, education and its central discipline, literary criticism, were confirmed as the privileged vantage-points from which to identify and promote the ‘essential interests’ of society.

(Mulhern, 1979: 188).

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<sup>55</sup> A similar point is made by Fred Inglis who argues that Leavis “dissolved the category of politics” and that this was effected “in order to insist upon the domain of morality as coterminous with that of both politics and aesthetics, and further as conceptually superordinate to both.” (Inglis, 1982: 104).

Although this was written about D. W. Harding and his article “The Custom of War and the Notion of Peace” which appeared in *Scrutiny* in 1940 it accurately highlights the dominant features of Leavis’s criticism in which the centrality of the moral development of the individual through education is undisputable. It also foregrounds a very important point that needs to be brought into my discussion at this point. This point is that the ‘moral development of the individual’ was considered the supreme “political’ question’. Since this development could only take place within a cultural space where moral ideas could flourish and be properly articulated, the university as conceived by Leavis assumed that role. Consequently, what was achieved here was not only the ‘ethicalisation’ of actual politics but the ‘politicisation’ of the university as well. However, this ‘politicisation’ was merely the effect of a kind of meta-politics. As Mulhern has intimated, that may be internally coherent and morally earnest but in terms of the real problems that it sought to solve it was nevertheless highly ineffective. Leavis’s idealism made him hypostatise ethics and conceive of education as the only really effective political act. By positing two distinct aspects of politics, the moral and the technical and by regarding the technical-administrative aspect and everything that it entails – organisation, planning, policy-making – as merely a necessary evil, Leavis, in order to be consistent, had no other choice but to prioritise the moral-educational aspect of his own practice leaving aside any other consideration. In this he was radical in the sense that he honestly believed that the moral-educational quality of his criticism and of literary and cultural criticism in general was what enabled him to address the problems at the root, in other words to address the problematical conditions that according to him gave birth to the social and cultural problems he so accurately diagnosed. But the moral problematic pushed his criticism even further away from the real political and social issues that he wished to address. He acknowledged the extreme economic inequalities in his society as he also acknowledged the existence of a class system that effectively (re)produced these inequalities

but he never took the step of treating these considerations as serious analytical tools. Instead he treated them as mere epiphenomena, secondary effects of a deeper set of problems.<sup>56</sup> These problems had little to do with the material conditions of life but a lot to do with a fundamental cultural trauma: the loss of cultural stability and continuity<sup>57</sup>. This led him to declare in “Under Which King, Bezonian?” that the process of ‘civilisation’ with which, in his view, Marxism was also complicit

has made the cultural difference between the ‘classes’ inessential. The essential differences are indeed now definable in economic terms, and to aim at solving the problems of civilization in terms of the ‘class war’ is to aim, whether wittingly or not, at completing the work of capitalism and its products, the cheap car, the wireless and the cinema. (Leavis, 1933: 172)

This provocative but easily understandable thesis came at a time when a particularly British Marxism was attempting in its own way to engage critically with the problems of the era and also at the same time challenge those assumptions that underlay Leavis’s work. Leavis accepted the challenge mainly because the claims of left-wing criticism were too strong – and, during the thirties, too urgent – to be ignored. However, he never made any real effort to understand Marxism nor did he feel that the elusive points of contact between his thought and Marxism could ever make him adopt a more self-critical attitude regarding his work. Instead he chose to treat the body of work that was produced by the Left as essentially a variation of the dominant discourse of ‘civilisation’ or, as he explicitly puts it in the text above, of ‘capitalism’. By confusing these two discourses, for him only superficially antithetical, Leavis made a strategic choice that was as ideologically conditioned as it was

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<sup>56</sup> A relatively brief discussion of Leavis’s class-blindness can be found in Paul Lawford’s “Conservative Empiricism in Literary Theory: A Scrutiny of the Work of F. R. Leavis”, pt. 1, *Red Letters*, 1 (1976), 12-15.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Bell, a critic sympathetic to Leavis, has aptly remarked that “his [Leavis’s] concern for continuity was complemented, as part of its inner logic, by an equally strong, indeed iconoclastic, perception of the need for radical change. But his sense of what mattered for the quality of communal life left him agnostic with respect to specific political models. His concern was with the conditions in which any political activity could be significant. His position was far from a-political and could perhaps best be described as ‘pre-political’.” (Bell, 1988: 54)

inevitable. This strategic choice resulted like all similar discursive choices in a conceptual fusion of opposite terms and repressed elements, in other words in a conflation of what is left out with what is merely antithetical to the main terms<sup>58</sup>. As a consequence of this, the negative aspects of contemporary civilization were demonized to the point where any ideologically coherent criticism became impossible. Even worse, these aspects began to appear suspiciously similar to what Leavis's discourse never really managed to come to terms with and subsequently repressed altogether. This was of course the alternative of socialism and the challenge it posed to the prevailing forms of thought and political organization in the thirties. That this was so, given that Leavis was the only major cultural critic of the era (the thirties) to take Marxism seriously<sup>59</sup> as an ideological challenge, makes this missed opportunity even more regrettable.

These tensions that characterize Leavis's thought should be more closely examined in the hope of bringing to the surface some of the less pronounced characteristics of his work. These characteristics are structurally connected with three choices: a) the substitution of morality for politics; b) the substitution of a culturally-defined minority for any political organisation in general; and c) the substitution of an idealist conception of history for a materialistic one. I have already presented my arguments regarding the first two choices and now I must turn my attention to the third one. This is, in my opinion, the most important one since it concerns the underlying set of principles of Leavis's whole critical project. In what follows I shall attempt to show that it is this philosophy of history, determined, to a

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<sup>58</sup> A similar point is made by Chris Baldick in *The Social Mission of English Criticism*: "(w)here Leavis appears most to agree with Marxism (...) he formulates most exactly, by an apparent paradox, his fundamental divergence from it. For the repeated specification of Marxism's proper realm (he refers again in "Under Which King, Bezonian?" to communism as the solution to the economic problem) effectively quarantines it in a way which leaves the problem of 'Power' in its other sense quite untouched. Leavis's ready agreement with a purely economist caricature of 'Marxism' smothers the essential Marxist assertion that class differences extend beyond the economic and into the political realm, i.e. that one class wields the power of the state 'machine' while the others do not. With the concept of power confined in this way to an economic and technological reference, Leavis's concession amounts to a kiss of death for his Marxist opponents. If the focus of power in society is the machine and not the state, there can be no essential conflict between the Marxist and the bourgeois, committed as they are to the extension of an identical power. Politics, as such therefore ceases to exist for Leavis; there remain only the realm of economics and the realm of culture." (Baldick, 1983: 171)

<sup>59</sup> This is Perry Anderson's contention in his seminal "Components of the National Culture" in *New Left Review*, 50, May/June 1968.



great extent, by Leavis's class position and ideological affiliations, that preconditioned not only his tactical (theoretical) moves but the entire field with which he chose to engage. It is also the main determinant factor that may account for his inability or unwillingness to consider alternatives other than his own chosen course of action. I have already indicated the debt of Leavis's thought to a specific tradition of English social and cultural criticism. This tradition is undoubtedly a bourgeois tradition and as such it shares certain fundamental, structural features with other competing bourgeois discourses. These features are: the concealment of economic inequalities, the complicity with the underlying aims of the dominant order, the narrativisation of history and philosophy so as to comply with the interests of the dominant class; all these and other characteristics make this tradition a part of a wider discursive formation that began to take shape during the eighteenth century. But there are important divergences that need to be noted as well.

The tradition that mostly inspired Leavis's critical undertaking was mainly a tradition of dissent, a tradition that was marked by the tensions generated by the painful realisation that its own existence was at times at odds with the economic system that supported it. As the 'public sphere' – the first cultural formation to define explicitly the 'rules of the game', in terms determined exclusively by the ascending bourgeois class – was beginning to transform into something different than it was originally intended, the first signs of discontent began to appear and criticism, itself a product of the 'public sphere', was the site where those signs were most visibly registered. As Terry Eagleton has noted, regarding the period from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, the realm of 'culture', the notional space which the 'public sphere' paradigmatically served, proved "unable to withstand (...) the intrusion into it of social and political interests in palpable conflict with its own 'universal' rational norms." (Eagleton, 1984: 35). As a result criticism was forced to engage for the first time with cultural and political processes which were viewed as totally external to it and some even threatening the very conditions of its own privileged status.

Thus “criticism [becomes] a locus of political contention rather than a terrain of cultural consensus” (ibid, 39) and critics like Carlyle, the late Coleridge and later on Arnold began to voice the anxieties of a privileged community which was slowly but steadily seeing that the reality it lived was in a state of constant decline, a state of slow decay that effectively cancelled out the cultural function of any such enlightened minority.<sup>60</sup>

Leavis inherited this whole set of attitudes and since he began to form his critical views at a time during which the myth of catastrophe was in wide circulation<sup>61</sup> it is understandable that he adopted an intensely defensive attitude towards the cultural phenomena of his own era. This attitude, a product of both a heightened sensitivity and deep-rooted prejudice, forced Leavis to attempt to rescue morality from its aimless existence in a profoundly amoral world and to provide it with shelter inside the idealised realm of literature which then becomes its natural habitat and the ideal vehicle for its articulation. The more ‘culture’ is on the defensive the more it internalises the only one principle that it may ‘rightfully’ claim as its own<sup>62</sup>. In addition to that, this defensive attitude, which in itself is not necessarily reproachable, is at each step complemented by an idealistic conception of history that forced him to dissociate history from both necessity and struggle. These two are the absent elements in Leavis’s philosophy of history. In fact they are only absent because they have been repressed by an ideology which could only succeed if it concealed the most contradictory elements within it. It was a process that generated tension at the same time it attempted to resolve it.

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<sup>60</sup> Eagleton eloquently summarises the position of this ‘secular clerisy of letters’ at the end of the nineteenth century by saying that due to the gradual disappearance of the social and cultural conditions which guaranteed the effectiveness of a discourse predicated on social cohesion and consensus the critic is forced to speak “not in class accents but in human tones, which turns scornfully from an actual ‘mass’ public and addresses itself instead to the People, to the future, to some potential mass political movement, to the Poetic Genius buried in every breast, to a community of transcendental subjects spectrally inscribed within the given social order.” (Eagleton, 1984: 43).

<sup>61</sup> See for instance Anne Samson’s account of the cultural context of Leavis’s own criticism in *F.R. Leavis*, (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) pp. 36-52

<sup>62</sup> Bernard Bergonzi has remarked that “(t)he concept of morality involved [in Leavis’s criticism] would have been unintelligible to a great moral critic of the past, that earlier Doctor, Samuel Johnson, for whom the ethical values which governed life were not immanent in literature but external to it in Christian tradition; one did not draw such values from literature, one judged it by them” (Bergonzi, 1990: 52).

In the early 1930s, at a time when Leavis was still seriously debating with the Marxists the notions of culture and politics he wrote in “Marxism and Cultural Continuity” something that I believe is one of the most telling signs of the classical idealist methodology which works more by leaps of faith than by rational argument. Leavis responded to an article written by the famous American left-wing critic Edmund Wilson under the title “Art, the Proletariat and Marx”<sup>63</sup> and most particularly to a point made by Wilson that Marx and Engels “were aiming at a point of view and a culture beyond those of their bourgeois education” and that this “was a point of view above classes, not a proletarian point of view” which evidently entailed the development “of an intellectual discipline which should lay the foundations for the ‘first truly human culture’”. Leavis seized the opportunity presented by this somewhat simplistic presentation of Marx’s and Engels’s cultural politics to assert that

(t)here *is*, then, a point of view above classes; there *can* be intellectual, aesthetic and moral activity that is not merely an expression of class origin and economic circumstances; there *is* a “human culture” to be aimed at that must be achieved by cultivating a certain autonomy of the human spirit” (Leavis, 1933: 9)

What is striking here is that the assertion of the possibility of a culture beyond classes and class conflict is predicated upon an abstract possibility. Even if we leave aside all considerations regarding the initial comment of Wilson we must still try to read Leavis’s conclusion for what it wishes to convey, namely that it is not only a question of abstract possibility but also a question of a (Leavisian) categorical imperative. There *must* be a ‘view above classes’, there *must* be some activity which is ‘not merely an expression of class origins and economic circumstances’ because this is the only way for Leavis to fuse his idealistic conception of history and culture with his own particular brand of cultural politics. What we have here is a double mistake. The first is that the assumption of a culture ‘beyond classes’ is

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<sup>63</sup> New Republic, 1933.

taken at face value from a commentator and not from the initial source. If this were not the case Leavis might have been able to see that for both Marx and Engels a classless society and culture is the ultimate end, the *desideratum* after a long and arduous revolutionary process and certainly not something that is immediately realisable under the present conditions. The purely 'human culture' that is essential to the Marxist conception of politics is the end product of a successful transformation of society on a global scale after the eradication of all the factors that deny the majority of human beings the right to create and participate in that 'human culture'. The future, in other words, is always the product of the dialectical tension between real human possibilities and a system, much more complex than what Leavis believed, which by structural necessity frustrates them.

Leavis, on his part, could not see a future mediated by political struggle; he only saw the possibility, with some qualifications, of a *right here and now* which was predicated, as I said above, on the assumption of the 'eternal presence' of an essential humanity in all the past, present and future instances of human praxis. This assumption might not have been so misleading were it not complemented by the constant effacement of contradictions. Because it was precisely these contradictions of a class-based system that Leavis's criticism attempted to conceal or – if concealment was not possible – misconstrue so that his own criticism might still fulfil its function without ever coming to terms with the conditions that determined its existence, namely the class-system that enabled him to assume the role of the enlightened prophet of a lost culture and humanity. Leavis remained convinced until the end of his life that this role was assumed when one felt a strong sense of responsibility for the unbearable loss of traditional values. Yet he never attempted to theorise or even describe the social conditions that enabled one to feel and consequently assume responsibility in the first place. Thus he could say thirty years after his work in the 1930s, that

...as for the actual working-class people who *can* be regarded as characteristic, it's not anything in the nature of moral indignation one feels towards them, but shame, concern and apprehension at the way *our* civilization has let them down... (F. R. Leavis & Q. D. Leavis, 1969: 5)

Anne Samson has rightly commented that the distinctions made by Leavis between the 'actual working-class people' and '*our* civilization' which has 'let *them* down' "are revealing, the more so for being unconscious". They also serve as an oblique reference to the real objectives of his cultural intervention since they indicate that "to Leavis the working class seems to belong to a significantly different species from himself" (Samson: 1992: 66). I believe that this distance so intensely dramatised in this passage by the word 'shame' is indicative of two aspects of his thought each in contradiction to the other.

Firstly it is the humanity of the observer that compels him to feel shame and concern towards those who are rightly perceived as victims of an unjust social process. Secondly a fissure in this very humanity draws the observer apart from the other human beings he feels for, and he consequently can refer to as 'them'. Leavis was at the same so far and so close to others, so sensitive to a fundamental lack of justice and yet so unwilling to engage with the real causes of this injustice that could transform his 'apprehension' into constructive engagement. This contradiction at the core of his cultural criticism is the effect of his idealist conception of history which made him conceive of technological progress and industrialisation as an irrevocable loss of human values while at the same time ignoring the contradictory nature of the cultural formations or models that he so clearly wished to idealise. By consistently confusing the detail – often observed with a sensitivity and accuracy worthy of admiration – with the whole structure and also by refusing to conceive this structure in terms other than those of his post-Romantic, naively anti-capitalist sensibilities Leavis's thought was bound by the limitations of a mythological narrative that took the place of a detailed, rationally argued historical account.

Raymond Williams rightly took Leavis to task for confusing two distinct, although related, aspects of the life of the people who are part of the 'organic society'. Williams argued that although certain aspects of this life did give people the opportunity to find meaning and satisfaction in their daily productive activities we should not infer, as Leavis did, that this was 'right and inevitable'. Williams then concluded that "it is foolish and dangerous to exclude from the so-called organic society the penury, the petty tyranny, the disease and mortality, the ignorance and frustrated intelligence which were also among its ingredients" (Williams, 1963: 253). Leavis was unable to see the whole complex of relations because his belief was adamant that certain things are 'right and inevitable'.<sup>64</sup> Therefore he was quick to see alienation but not any intellectual or spiritual progress. He never ceased to hold that an alleged moral impoverishment outweighed any material improvement in the conditions of life. Moreover, the changes he could see he interpreted as the tragic outcome of a process that dissociated language from ordinary sensibility and culture as a shared set of values from the ordinary life of people. His history was one of ideas, of feelings that only come in contact with the material world to either configure it from a position of authority, or to be contaminated by it.

This idealism made him very sensitive to the decline of Western civilisation but paradigmatically insensitive to the material causes of this transformation. The proletarianization of a great number of the rural population, the alienation of the modern worker, the intensification of social and cultural conditioning, the commodification of literature, the gradual absorption of all social areas into the capitalist mode of production were all for Leavis moral rather material and political issues. For him what has suffered defeat was the moral essence of an entire race and not the majority of working people who

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<sup>64</sup> To be fair to Leavis, it must be noted that in his later works he seemed more willing to make the concession that the material conditions of life have indeed improved with the advent of industrial technology. He would also attempt to communicate to his audience that he was not in any way a reactionary who wished a radical return to a past mode of life but one who used 'organic community' more as an ideal-typical example for what he was trying to draw attention to: the loss of both cultural continuity in the diachronic level and cultural cohesion in the synchronic one.

had to sell their labour under conditions that, it must be said, traditional morality was totally unprepared to take into account or comprehend. If the concept of class was not allowed to enter into his problematic then the social formation where this moral essence was best articulated was the 'community'. The problem with this concept is that it is hard to conceive of an understanding which claims to transcend the merely empirical and which falls back on something so elusive and so underspecified. Even if we accept the notion of the 'community' as a conceptual tool, it is hard to see its relevance in any contemporary emancipatory project unless we are content with a concept that has strong, if historically disputable, moral connotations but very little explanatory power. This is, I believe, due to the fact that 'community' alludes not so much to a sociologically and historically accurate formation, but rather to a moral imperative inherent in the very concept of the social formation *qua* human formation. 'Community' and 'morality' complement each other and both substitute 'class' and 'politics'. This substitution has also other more particular effects: 'literature' takes its turn and can then substitute a wide network of cultural practices, 'education' consequently substitutes 'political practice' and although it must be noted that this process of substitution is never completed in such a way so as to efface completely the substituted term it nevertheless succeeds in marginalising it effectively enough so as to render it temporarily ineffectual. This is the one crucial characteristic of the discursive formation, one instance of which is Leavis's criticism, that I may designate as 'moral ideology'.<sup>65</sup> I shall conclude this essay by examining more closely the relation of this moral ideology with Leavis's criticism.

#### LITERATURE AS MORAL PEDAGOGY: AN APPRAISAL OF LEAVIS'S CRITICAL THOUGHT

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<sup>65</sup> Terry Eagleton has aptly remarked that in the work of critics like Arnold, James and Leavis "Morality is no longer to be grasped as a formulated code or explicit ethical system: it is rather a sensitive preoccupation with the whole quality of life itself, with the oblique, nuanced particulars of human experience. Somewhat rephrased, this can be taken as meaning that the old religious ideologies have lost their force, and that a more subtle communication of moral values, one which works by 'dramatic enactment' rather than rebarbative abstraction, is thus in order. Since such values are nowhere more vividly dramatized than in literature, brought home to 'felt experience' with all the unquestionable reality of a blow on the head, literature becomes more than just a handmaiden of moral ideology: it *is* moral ideology for the modern age ..." (Eagleton, 1983: 27).

I have already argued for the centrality of certain notions in Leavis's criticism. To this I must add that their prominence in his critical practice can only be the object of a constructive political critique if these notions are viewed as the key elements in a structure which is, in all aspects, more complex than a simple aggregate of various characteristics could ever be. This structure is of course the entire work of Leavis but for my purposes here I shall concentrate on the one aspect of it that often eludes the more descriptive approaches to Leavis's criticism. This aspect is the ideology of his criticism which I shall treat as essentially designating the whole complex of meanings generated by the texts that comprise Leavis's oeuvre in a dialectical relation to the historical circumstances that determined their production. I have already referred to the general historical context of Leavis's early work and the effect it had on his criticism. Yet, there is another process, much more wide in scope and general in character that occurs at the same time and which runs parallel to what I have been discussing so far. This profoundly ideological process is the transformation of both political thought and practice in the aftermath of the First World War. The fact that such a war was allowed to happen in the first place had enormously crippling effects on the liberal-humanist ideology which consisted the foundation of Western democracies. This crisis was registered not only at the level of culture but also at the level of politics and political reasoning as well. Its effects were felt both in practice and in the dominant ideology. Regarding the ascendance of the various strands of the Right after World War I Eric Hobsbawm has argued that

A second strand of the Right produced what has been called 'organic statism' (Linz, 1975, pp. 277, 306-13) or conservative regimes, not so much defending a traditional order, but deliberately recreating its principles as a way of resisting both Liberal individualism and the challenge of labour and socialism. Behind it stood an ideological nostalgia for an imagined Middle Ages or feudal society, in which the existence of classes or economic groups was recognized but the awful prospect of class struggle was kept at bay by the willing acceptance of social hierarchy, by a



recognition that each social group or 'estate' had its part to play in an organic society composed of all, and should be recognized as a collective entity. This produced various brands of 'corporativist' theories which replaced liberal democracy by the representation of economic and occupational interest groups. This was sometimes described as 'organic' participation or democracy and therefore better than the real kind, but in fact was invariably combined with authoritarian regimes and strong states ruled from above, largely by bureaucrats and technocrats. (Hobsbaum, 1994: 113-4).

What is remarkable about this account is the uncanny resemblance of this right-wing ideology with Leavis's own historical and cultural assumptions. This is not to imply in any way that Leavis's ideology did belong to the traditional Right.<sup>66</sup> What I wish to suggest is that his whole ideological view of the world is formed and articulated in close affinity with an ideology that was in its essence incompatible with what Leavis wished to be associated with. Nevertheless, the observable affinities between his politics and the 'organicist', corporativist Right indicate something important, namely that his class-position and his ideological presuppositions created the possibility of his criticism adopting a reactionary attitude, which was often at odds with the more radical aspects of his whole critical practice. What is important here is the tension between these two tendencies. His insistence on the importance of literature as a repository of human values, his committed moral interpretations of literary works in conjunction with his belief in the social relevance of such an interpretation, his injunction for a full, uninhibited response to the literary work in order to achieve a more intimate knowledge of human experience are all things we would not normally associate with any rightist ideology, traditional or modern. However, in his criticism they form an unholy alliance with his ideas on the exclusionary character of the 'true'

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<sup>66</sup> In fact, Leavis had little time, if any, for Conservative thought. Himself a Liberal, he espoused those values that are traditionally associated with classical liberalism.

university<sup>67</sup>, the necessity of an 'armed and conscious minority' and finally with his tacit assumption regarding the unavoidability of a hierarchical stratification of society even if the latter is often qualified by means of a more rational argumentation which is put forward as a pragmatic consideration of the present conditions. I believe that this problematical co-existence of competing ideas is often the reason behind his notorious circular arguments. I also hold that this is a paradigmatic instance of his class ideology which makes him adopt an extremely ambivalent position regarding the essential problems of his time. His typical petty-bourgeois synthesis of "Romantic metaphysics, Kantian ethics, and liberal politics" (Inglis, 1982: 101) betrays this ambivalence in the sense that uninhibited vitality, deontological morality and pluralism are all exemplary ideological expressions of bourgeois ideology and the points where the internal contradictions of this ideology are most graphically illustrated. His inability to acknowledge these contradictions led him to the formulation of a critical method which was theological in essence. But since this covert theology was not based on dogma, as was the case of T. S. Elliot for instance, it could acquire coherence only by utilising morality, which in this case effectively substituted dogma in the same way it substituted politics at another level. This double function of the *moral* in Leavis's criticism, as a substitute for politics and as a substitute for religion is what I consider the most crucial characteristic of his thought from the perspective of a political critique. I do so because this double function not only illustrates the political implications of his criticism but also foregrounds the particular character of a petty-bourgeois criticism which is by necessity torn between two conflicting priorities. On the one hand, the desire to construct a space where isonomy and the ensuing 'civilised conversation' among those who would rightfully inhabit such a space would guarantee the preservation of the essential human values and on the

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<sup>67</sup> The irony is that Leavis himself was never really accepted by Cambridge. For him, that came to signify something he could claim as an honour so that he could declare that he and the Scrutineers were the 'essential Cambridge, in spite of Cambridge'. For more details from the point of view of Leavis himself see "Scrutiny: A Retrospect" in *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*, ed. by G. Singh, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

other hand the need to resist any theoretical consideration that may challenge the complicity of those human values with the very system that mostly endangers them.

Despite Leavis's unquestionable sincerity in his quest for a significance removed from the ready-made truths of contemporary consumer-oriented capitalism his criticism leaves a contradictory impression. Leavis's vision was an admirably consistent one and yet one certain to make a critical reader of his work feel disappointed that he who once wrote that a serious educational movement must "inevitably, and as far as I am concerned, explicitly, aim at fostering in schools and in education generally, an anti-acquisitive and anti-competitive moral bent, on the ground (there are others) that the inherited code is disastrously and obviously inappropriate to modern conditions" (Leavis, 1933: 185) was not, in the end, able or willing to carry the implications of his moral beliefs to their logical conclusion and articulate a truly radical critique of the existing cultural and political order.

## THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RADICAL FREEDOM:

### THE CRITICISM OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

And if I am given this world with its injustices, it is not so that I may contemplate them coldly, but that I may animate them with my indignation, that I may disclose them and create them with their nature as injustices, that is, as abuses to be suppressed.

*What is Literature?*

Jean-Paul Sartre is widely considered to be one of the most prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century. In his case this is most certainly not an exaggerated title of honour. Sartre has not only been central to almost all the major intellectual and political events of the best part of the past century but also tried with an admirable honesty and dedication to comprehend, analyze and ultimately influence both intellectually and practically the outcome of these events. Born in 1905 his life spanned seventy five years, during which the historical complexity that characterised the twentieth century was, at every moment, dialectically related to the personal complexity of his own life. If I use the word 'dialectically' it is not only because it designates, in my view, the true nature of the relation between history and subjectivity, but also because it is so befitting a man that has made this relation one of his most enduring intellectual and political concerns. From the German occupation and the Resistance, which is the turning point for Sartre's serious engagement with the socio-political aspect of historical reality, through his active involvement in politics in the post-war period (his instrumental role in the formation of the RDR (*Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire*) as a non-Stalinist alternative to the official Left; his *rapprochement* in 1952 with the French Communist Party; his eventual split with them in 1956 on the occasion of the Soviet invasion of Hungary; his active involvement with the Algerian question taking sides with the FLN

(*Front de Libération National*) and their cause; his immediate support for the students in the events of May 68) to his last decade where even in poor health he never ceased to participate in and engage with everything that he considered urgent. These events, situations and debates are an integral part of the French history of the twentieth century. It is however this very biography, so intimately connected with the history of its era and, consequently, so much mythologized, that occasionally obscures the critical appraisal of Sartre. Being, to all intents and purposes, a cultural and intellectual icon of his century, Sartre, as part of our tradition, is often considered more as one of the most valued items in the imaginary museum of Western modernity than as a present force still pertinent and worthy of our serious attention. The discussion that follows is based on an implicit acceptance of Sartre's continuing relevance for many of the theoretical debates of the present. In other words, Sartre is important not only for what he has been, but also for what he may still be for us now a quarter of a century after his death.

#### SUBJECTIVITY AND FREEDOM: THE IMPERATIVES OF A NEW RADICAL PHILOSOPHY

In attempting to trace the evolution of Sartre's moral thought it is imperative that one should start with *Being and Nothingness* which is his first major philosophical work. In this work Sartre attempts to produce an ontology of Being under the decisive influence of Husserl and Heidegger. From these premises (the intentionality of human consciousness in Husserl and the consideration of being as *Dasein* or being-in-the-world in Heidegger) Sartre presents his ontology of the human situation as based on the radical distinction between being-in-itself (inert matter) and being-for-itself (human beings). What is of interest to me here is the definition of the being-for-itself which is the ontological status of man. According to Sartre being-for-itself is devoid of any essence that exists independently of it, waiting as it were for this being to incarnate it. The being-for-itself does not have any essence as is the case of the being-in-itself, but instead it is in a constant state of becoming. Given this

premise Sartre considers being-for-itself not a stable, immutable entity but a process. In this process being-for-itself creates its world by constant transformation of external matter or, in Sartre's terms, by nihilating the facticity of the being-in-itself that constitutes both the origin (and, more ominously, an always open possibility) of the for-itself and the internal structure of the material world. This being-for-itself can thus "found its nothingness but not its being. In its decompression it nihilates itself in a for-itself, which becomes qua for-itself its own foundation" (Sartre, 1993: 84). Man, or the being-for-itself can and will, by necessity, *become* but he can never just *be* in the same manner as, for instance, a stone can. Man cannot resort, even in times of the most dire need, to an essence which will consequently legitimize his actions or his life in general. He cannot but choose himself since "nothing comes to [him] either from the outside or from within which [he] can *receive* or *accept*" (ibid, 440). This lack of essence is predicated on the impossibility of a divine or any other external authority that might determine what man is and this in turn reinforces the argument that man is radically (one is tempted to say painfully) free to determine his own being. In Sartre's early philosophy man is "condemned to exist forever beyond [his] essence, beyond the causes and motives of [his] act" (ibid, 439). In short, and this is one the most radical points of *Being and Nothingness*, man is "condemned to be free" (ibid, 439). What that entails is that man's freedom is an absolute given which cannot be denied even if man wishes to. Sartre makes abundantly clear that "we are not free to cease being free" (ibid, 439).

In the absence of God or any higher legitimizing authority man is alone in becoming what he chooses by projecting himself onto the future, shaping himself and the world according to the choices which, despite what various deterministic philosophies have attempted to argue, are – according to Sartre – his and his own only. As a result man is solely responsible for his actions and the burden, that he carries however heavy it may be is nevertheless his fate in the sphere of being that he inhabits. Man's freedom, which for Sartre is not "a quality added on or a *property* of [man's] nature" but "the stuff of [man's] being"

(ibid, 439) is the constant surpassing, the never-ending transformation of the present into the future, a continuous act of negation in view of a future positivity which in turn will be itself negated and transformed and so on *ad infinitum*. In Sartre's ontology "freedom can be nothing other than this nihilation" (ibid, 439).

Given such a radical ontology of inalienable freedom one is left with the question of the possibility of ethics in a human world devoid of any metaphysical certainties. If man is assumed to be a subjectivity that is, by sheer ontological necessity, so radically distinct from anything else that it comes into contact with (that is with other equally inalienable freedoms), the question of morality must be reformulated in terms of this situation of untranscendable solitude. In *Being and Nothingness*, this reformulation takes the form of the positing of yet another form of being, that of being-for-others. This mode of being, characteristic of the being-for-itself is predicated on the latter's quality as the "foundation of all relation" (ibid, 362). It is also based on the unavoidable conclusion that however singular a human being may be it still exists in a world populated by a multitude of other beings who share the same ontological structure of the being-for-itself. As a result of this man is engaged in a twofold process of becoming. On the one hand there is the struggle of his own existence in the world which he transforms through his own projects and on the other there is his co-existence with other subjectivities who in turn attempt to transform the very same world through their own projects. This new mode of being may allow Sartre to avoid solipsism but it also poses a new set of problems regarding the intersubjective relationships that Sartre clearly wishes to account for. The main new problem is that of the subject/object dichotomy. Within the framework of my own project I am the subject which objectifies what is external to me in my attempt to work on it, to transform it to something meaningful for me. But within the framework of the totality of human projects I find myself constituted as an object by the others' attempt to do precisely what I did in my case. Therefore, in my existence in the world I find myself constantly alternating between these two ontological positions: an objectifying

subject and an object. Even the mere contingency of an unintended glance risks alienating me (even if it is only for an instant) from my own subjectivity. In a world inhabited by others “my freedom is alienated in the presence of the Other's pure subjectivity which founds my objectivity” (ibid, 375). Even in the most intimate and involving of relations, that is in love one always finds himself in the contradictory situation of being at the same time a subject that wills the submission of the other as the *object* of one's love and himself as the *object* of the other's love. Yet, even as an object the lover “wants to be the object in which the Other's freedom consents to lose itself” thus wishing not so much “to *act* on the Other's freedom but to exist *a priori* as the objective limit of this freedom” (ibid, 367). It seems that this perpetually cancelled reciprocity of ontological integrity (a gluing down of the Other's freedom, in Sartre's words) is a vicious circle in which the constant alternation of subject/object positions condemns even love to re-enacting the drama of ontological uncertainty and struggle that characterises man throughout his entire life. It is no surprise then that Sartre begins his discussion of man's first attitudes towards others by stating that “conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” (ibid, 364).

If love and by extension fraternity and the possibility of collectives founded on principles other than self-interest prove to be always cancelled out by the restrictions our being-in-the-world poses to us then the possibility of grounding an ethics must be based on something other than the unstable – from an ontological point of view – foundations of intersubjective relations. So, man's subjectivity thrown into the world and at the same time always at risk of having its freedom compromised faces the task of asserting itself as radical freedom by assuming full responsibility for its situation. This is where Sartre's famous notions of authenticity and bad faith come into play. A man is authentic when he asserts by his choices and actions the freedom that conditions the very structure of his being while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of negating or falsifying this freedom by attempting to be something which he is not, in which case Sartre claims that he only acts in bad faith.



Sartre has formulated the problem in terms of man's ability to resist the temptation of identifying the other's perception of him as the sole criterion by which he is to conduct his life. In Sartre's ontology the moral implication of the notion of authenticity is that man makes himself what he is or, more accurately, that man is under constant obligation to assert that his mode of being is that of the being-for-itself, that of constantly becoming what he is not. In bad faith man, willingly objectified by the (individual or collective) other, opts for a mode of being very much akin to being-in-itself, that is a mode of being of someone who presents himself to the world as though he is an essence (chosen or imposed, it makes no difference) and not merely a stage in his becoming-himself.

Authenticity and bad faith both are important moral concepts in *Being and Nothingness*. The former<sup>68</sup> points to the conscious exercise of man's fundamental freedom while the latter is a constant reminder of the state that awaits him in case he chooses to actively negate the imperatives of this freedom and consequently avoid responsibility for his actions. Authenticity is inherently connected with this responsibility and the two heavily charged terms are in fact the nucleus of early Sartrean ethics. They both lead to a moral conception of the human situation, a conception still rather vague and underspecified. This moral conception rejects an a priori absolute system of values that would determine the attribution of moral value to an individual's actions. Morality is what man actively proposes even in the most implicit manner by the exercise of his free choice. If that morality, situated in a historical world but still too metaphysically conceived is at pains to reconcile itself with a dialectical conception of individual action and history it is nevertheless true that the first seeds of a radical ethical problematic are there in the pages of a book whose purpose is – as its author admits – the presentation of what is and not what ought to be. The closing of the gap between his ontology and a radical, non-bourgeois ethics will be one of Sartre's future tasks.

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<sup>68</sup> It must be noted that *Being and Nothingness* is not about 'authenticity' which only appears in footnotes. This concept will find a more expansive treatment in Sartre's later work and particularly in his literary texts.

At the end of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre announces his forthcoming examination of the ethical implications of his ontology. This work would never be completed but instead subsequently went through a series of impressive transformations and changes of direction. The first attempt took place in the mid-forties when Sartre was preparing a book on ethics that would rework and effectively transform his earlier position. This book never materialised but the notes that survived, and were published under the title *Notebooks for an Ethics* after his death, constitute a body of work which, although fragmentary in form, contains enough information to allow us to see the directions that Sartre's thought was taking at that time. Before however turning my attention to this work I wish to engage with another text that appeared at about the same time the *Notebooks* were being written.

*Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) was originally a public lecture given as a response to the huge controversy the "existentialist movement" was causing at that time, especially among the Christian Right and the Communist Left. This small text, which – to Sartre's dismay – came to be considered as a kind of existentialist manifesto, is in fact a concise introduction to all the major themes of existentialist (a term which, by that time, Sartre had grudgingly accepted) philosophy, a sort of primer for the interested layman who would never dare to open, let alone read, *Being and Nothingness* from start to finish. Yet, apart from its introductory function this text is also a defence of existentialist philosophy against the accusations of its opponents. It is this quality of the text that compels Sartre to be explicit about certain points which, in *Being and Nothingness*, were either implicitly referred to or virtually obscured due to the esoteric terminology of this text. These points were unsurprisingly related to the question of morality. Given the received opinion that existentialism was (for the Christians) an amoral and dangerously nihilistic philosophy and (for the Communists) the last spasms of a decaying petit-bourgeois ideology of subjectivism Sartre attempts to establish that neither is true and moreover that existentialism is both moral (in the wide sense of the word) and politically progressive.

What strikes us immediately in this text is the focus on the universal aspect of this new existentialist morality. If *Being and Nothingness* left a lot to be desired when it came to the question of societal structures and the possibility of a viable progressive politics *Existentialism is a Humanism* provided a somewhat simplistic but nevertheless urgently needed corrective. In it Sartre argues for a universalizable morality according to which man “is responsible for [himself] and for all men” and while he fashions himself through his exercise of freedom he “fashion[s] man” (Sartre, 1973: 30). In addition to that Sartre refuses the accusation that his philosophy leads man to inaction and passivity by asserting that “what we are considering is an ethic of action and self-commitment” (ibid: 44). What we have here is the introduction of the criteria of action and universalizability, that is precisely those elements that were lacking explicit formulation in his earlier work. Between a God-given, absolute morality and a relativism refuted on the basis not only of factual evidence but furthermore by its sheer logical inconsistency Sartre establishes a moral imperative that focuses on both the inalienable freedom of the individual agent and the demand that man’s free choices not only assert the existence of others by holding him answerable to their judgement but at the same time that they provide a template for any human action. Sartre declares that “[w]hat is at the very heart and centre of existentialism, is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realises himself in realising a type of humanity” (ibid, 47). Yet this expansion of one of the main theses of *Being and Nothingness* is still susceptible to its interpretation as nothing more than a modified form of radical subjectivism. Sartre was aware of that so, later in the text, after repeating that in committing oneself one is in fact committing the whole of humanity – not exactly a novel idea since that was in fact the guiding principle of the Kantian categorical imperative – he defends his moral theory by stating that “the moral choice is comparable to a work of art” (ibid, 48) which means that both have to do with “invention and creation” (ibid, 49). This statement failed to persuade the majority of Sartre’s critics and understandably so since the recourse to the free invention

and creativity reminded them of the shaky ontological ground of *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre made clear that, in his view, society was not simply the absent centre of the individual agent's existence. Yet in *Existentialism is a Humanism* the process of reciprocal conditioning remains undertheorised. What is more, when an attempt of theorization is finally made his idealist metaphysical assumptions about the absolute primacy of (abstract) subjectivity work against any satisfactory resolution. If in his earlier work conflict was the inescapable condition of human relations due to the fact that each agent's freedom necessarily negated the other's freedom, thus making any sort of radical social theory impossible,<sup>69</sup> in *Existentialism is a Humanism* this aspect was played down. However, when it came to the relation between individual and society the issue was barely resolved by the claim that the "man who discovers himself directly in the cogito also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence" (ibid, 45). That might be acceptable as a normative statement but we are not presented with a persuasive argument as to why this is so. How does a singular consciousness open up to the world in a positive – that is morally acceptable – manner simply by apprehending itself? What is in fact evidenced here is the willingness of a philosopher always sensitive to the shortcomings of his own theory to engage in a more profound level with the dialectics of subjectivity and objectivity. Yet, at that stage of his life Sartre, still working within the framework of Cartesian subjectivism, is unable to offer a satisfactory solution. A renewed attempt would be made more than a decade later with the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

#### TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPTION OF ETHICS AND POLITICS

If *Existentialism is a Humanism* was only hinting at the foundation of a moral theory, based on Sartre's ontology, his *Notebooks for an Ethics* were proven a far more committed attempt at

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas R. Flynn has argued that for Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* "the source of the difficulty and the obstacle to a more satisfactory social theory is ontological, not historical: his lookind/looked-at model for interpersonal relations" (Flynn, 1994: 85).

establishing an ethics situated at the intersection of subjectivity and history. The problem is of course that this attempt only remained at the level of a preparatory work and did not constitute a rigorous elaboration of the issue in question. The *Notebooks* attempts to offer a theoretical solution to the problem of morality evidenced in one of the main assumptions of *Being and Nothingness*, namely that being-for-itself includes ethics as only a possibility of its social mode of being-with-others. This possibility was much in need of a stable philosophical foundation so as to avoid being regarded as just another manifestation of the anguish-inducing contingency of being. Sartre starts his notebooks with a bold statement: "Morality has to transcend itself toward an end that is not itself" (Sartre, 1992: 3). What this means is that morality must be object-oriented and not subject-centred. It must affirm the ontological leap that Sartre clearly sees as its true movement: from the subject to another subject, society, history. Morality in this new conception must be "a choice of a world, not of a self" (ibid, 3). The universalizability of moral action, implied in *Being and Nothingness* and made explicit in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, becomes now the stepping stone for a new ethics. This opening up to the world is specifically related to history later on in another pronouncement that truly marks the beginning of a dialectical problematic on ethics: "Ethics must be historical: that is, it must find the universal in History and must grasp it in History" (ibid, 6). This bold move allows Sartre to revisit his ontology and reformulate the existence of man in the world, of the for-itself thus: "The appearance of the For-itself is properly speaking the irruption of History in the world" (ibid, 11). A little later after this reminder of the historical character of his most important ontological category Sartre writes: [t]he world resists ethics just as Nature resists science. One should speak of a hidden immorality of the world just as one speaks of a hidden irrationality of nature" (ibid, 13). This seems a strange argument implying that ethics is totally impossible not only in this world but in any other conceivable world as well and yet the closing part of this statement offers the possibility of a more charitable interpretation: "invention of an ethical solution as of a scientific hypothesis [only serve to] put off the

outbreak of conflict until later” (ibid, 13). It seems then that ethics is impossible and yet when it appears as a guiding framework for our actions its main purpose is none other but to prevent conflict. But what kind of conflict? Could it be the kind implied by the always-doomed-to-failure reciprocity described in Part III of *Being and Nothingness* or another more historically specific kind? Sartre does not elaborate this point, but instead completes his argument by stating that “ethics *today* must be revolutionary socialist ethics” (ibid, 12). What is important in this statement is the emphasis (Sartre’s) on ‘today’. No matter what foundation we may or may not give to ethics abstractly, what is important is that in *our* own time, in the concrete temporality of *our* history, we must assert the rights of the oppressed of all kinds against their oppressors. We have travelled a long way from *Being and Nothingness* but the end of our journey is nowhere near. Sartre does not explain why ethics must be revolutionary socialist.<sup>70</sup> He simply reaffirms in a more specific manner what he said in *Being and Nothingness*, namely that one always chooses the good only this time this good is given a historical specificity that was lacking from the previous work.

The best parts of the *Notebooks* are indeed a meditation on the dialectic of history and ethics under the guiding principle that “[e]very man at every moment escapes History (...) yet it is at the moment he escapes it (...) he is most inside History) (ibid, 45). This transcendence toward an absolute future – still in a state of immanence with regard to the total movement of history – should be considered as the proper level at which ethics should intervene (ibid, 47). What emerges from his scattered thoughts is the refutation of abstract Kantian ethics, Hegelian idealism and also the refutation of determinism in all its (idealistic or materialistic) varieties. Sartre tries to establish an alternative way of regarding morality as completely subordinated to pre-existing determining factors and at the same time tries to undermine the classic bourgeois conception of a formal ethics insensitive to social difference and the fact of legitimised oppression. The dialectic of individual freedom and political ends

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<sup>70</sup> Thomas C. Anderson provides a lucid and informed analysis of the *Notebooks*’ shortcomings in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *Sartre’s Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*, pp. 65-86.

is the main preoccupation of Sartre in his attempt to theorize a viable ethics beyond both (Stalinist) indifference and (bourgeois) complacency. What he also tries to do is establish a starting point from which the subjective/objectivity dichotomy could be adequately theorised and possibly surpassed altogether. I say starting point as Sartre was already aware that this dichotomy was extremely difficult to resolve, an awareness that was in fact the reason why this first attempt at such a resolution was ultimately abandoned by him. Sartre set himself a most difficult task, namely to argue for his main thesis that any conception of the good is vital to our understanding of the human situation not in terms of an ontology of good – what or whether the good is – but in terms of its emanating through us, through our concrete actions in a historically specific world (ibid, 556). It is again the being-for-itself that ‘produces’ morality through its action only this time history is constituting it through and through, inside as well as outside being the ultimate horizon beyond which man is unable not only to act but even exist *qua* being-for-itself. If we accept that the *Notebooks* represents this agonising attempt to establish the possibility of ethics within the totalising force of history then one of Sartre’s remarks is particularly important in our evaluation of his thought on this subject. Following a remark about the revolutionary’s ethics, according to Lenin, Sartre makes a statement that I believe is representative not only of the tenor of the entirety of his work at that time but also of the directions his thought would take in subsequent years.

Ethics is by definition an abstract fact. It is the goal one gives oneself when there is no goal. It is a certain way of treating others when one has no other relation to others except the purely ontological relationship. It appears therefore, when my relation to the other is defined by the purely formal recognition of his universal personhood. But his universal personhood is itself defined by his freedom, it is abstract recognition of his freedom as potential, not as actual. In other words, it obliges respect for freedom in general as a pure potentiality and it leaves undetermined the relation we ought to have with the content of his freedom. (...) In this sense, ethics, not having any real content, can only be conceived of in terms of some status quo. (...) It

is just a purely formal game between juridical persons. It appears where political action, religious life, history have been stopped. That is, in periods where abstract law defines the ethical person and when real History falls outside this definition. Hence it seems useless. Yet, in turn, the concrete goal that the historical agent proposes for himself presupposes a certain conception of man and of values. It is impossible to be a pure agent of History without some ideal goal (realism is pure passivity or valuing History *per se*). So it is suddenly no longer true that one may use any means whatsoever to realize the goal: they run the risk of destroying it. In this way we catch sight of, beyond the antinomy of ethics and History, a concrete ethics that is like *the logic of effective action*. (ibid, 103-104)

I have quoted the Sartre's note almost in its entirety because I think that it encapsulates all the main themes of Sartre's ethical thought. Also, and more importantly, it foregrounds all the specific problems that a Sartrean ethics would eventually need to confront and ultimately solve. Leaving aside the daring but somewhat problematic conflation of ethics in general with bourgeois ethics what is most telling is the perceived antinomy of ethics and History and the proposed alternative of a radical reformulation of the problem of concrete morality in terms of a *logic of effective action*. At this stage the path has been adequately cleared so that both a political ethics and an ethical politics can be articulated in a new language far removed for the ideologically laden tropes of bourgeois liberalism and Stalinist *Realpolitik*.

*Notebooks for an Ethics* marks a starting point for Sartrean ethics by simultaneously reformulating many of the basic themes of his earlier work and engaging with the problematic of history and progressive political action. They would be eventually abandoned but they would also lead Sartre to come to terms with dialectics and history, a task that he would undertake in his subsequent work. This text, due to its fragmentary form, only offered an investigation into a general philosophical problematic; two other texts from roughly the same period dealt with more specific problems by applying many of the ideas and themes that were predominant in Sartre's thought during the immediate post-war era. *What is Literature?* and *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* are among the most important critical texts of



Sartre, each representing a sort of a template for his later critical texts on literature and the creative process.

#### LITERATURE AS BOTH MORAL AND SOCIAL FACT: THE DIALECTICS OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

*What is Literature?* is a collection of articles which first appeared in the *Temps Modernes* between February and July 1947. I shall attempt to discuss this work in conjunction with three other thematically similar texts: the articles “Introducing *Les Temps Modernes*” (1945), “The Nationalization of Literature” (1945), and “Black Orpheus” (1948), the last being the preface to an anthology of works by African and West Indian poets edited by Léopold Sédar-Senghor<sup>71</sup>. This ensemble of texts shape common themes and critical concerns. They constitute the first major attempt by Sartre to formulate a literary critical theory that would do justice to the complex articulation of history and subjectivity. These are also the texts in which a key term that points to this very articulation appears for the first time: commitment<sup>72</sup>. Yet commitment is not the only new idea presented in these texts; it is complemented by that of freedom in its specific application to the reciprocal relation between writer and reader. Commitment and freedom form a pair of concepts that enable Sartre to reconcile his radical ontological subjectivism with the political and historical milieu of his time, a milieu from which the abstract cogito presented in *Being and Nothingness* had to emerge so that it could successfully negotiate the tension between its irreducible freedom and its new-found faith in the political imperative of a socialist transformation of society.

In the first essay in *What is Literature?* under the title “What is Writing?” Sartre makes his famous and highly controversial distinction between poetry and prose. He argues that whereas the poet treats language as an object in order to convey his most personal feelings

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<sup>71</sup> *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).

<sup>72</sup> I have opted for this translation of the French term *engagement* instead of its literal equivalent ‘engagement’ because it is the one most widely accepted.

and attitudes with scant regard for communication, the prose writer treats language as a vehicle for communication, as a means for action towards a specific audience that he wishes to inform and guide. The poet in Sartre's view takes advantage of the self-referential aspect of the language which allows him to produce verbal artefacts that only have a very indirect relation to the reality of the world. Poems are personal, affective, use-less (in the sense of not having any immediate practical value), they crystallize the poet's subjectivity which finds in the word-objects he puts on paper its own image reflected back to it. In other words, poetry is a quasi-mystical use of language more akin to painting or music. It uses language much the same way painting uses colour and music sounds. In contrast prose communicates. It acts on words transcending language-as-matter towards language-as-medium. Its aim is not to project an image of oneself (although that does happen as well) but rather to say something specific to its readership in general. Sartre claims that the function of the prose-writer is to write so that "nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about." (Sartre, 1988: 38). The prose-writer is not expressing himself, he lets the truth be known. His commitment is precisely this demand to expose the truth. That however does not mean he is committed to an essentially epistemological undertaking. It is ethics and, as I shall argue later on, politics that distinguish his vocation.

The polemical disjunction of prose and poetry that is inaugurated in this text would eventually become one of the most controversial aspects of Sartre's literary theory. Sartre's identification of poetry with a certain affective use of language very much in the manner of narcissistic play-acting is predicated on his conviction that prose is, in some ways, a performative use of language. This is of course an untenable position but I think that what Sartre meant above all to say is that prose engages with the (historical) present in a way that poetry cannot. It must be noted at this point that whenever Sartre speaks of poetry he is almost invariably referring to the poetry which came slowly into being through the Romantic period and emerged fully with Baudelaire and his generation; modern(ist) poetry is not

considered. If it were it would have been more difficult for Sartre to claim that poetry operates at such a distance from the actuality of the present that it is of no practical use for the politically progressive uses he has in mind for literature. However in "Black Orpheus", a brave and inspiring text written only a couple of years after "What is Writing?", apart from its manifest intention which is to promote solidarity with the revolutionary struggle of the colonial people Sartre departs significantly from his negative view of the politically progressive efficacy of poetry. Whereas in "What is Writing?" Sartre effectively displaces poetry considering it as too self-serving a literary form to really contribute to a literature of praxis, in "Black Orpheus" poetry is by sheer necessity elevated to the status of a literary medium quite capable of being the vehicle of a critical, politically engaged consciousness. Sartre attempts to show how the poet using a language not his own strives to express his feelings against the colonial reality which – and this is the paradox Sartre tries to address – is articulated in precisely this foreign language. The poet having realised that this language that he was taught in school is a poor instrument in his quest for authentic meaning and the liberation of his race utilizes it in an oblique, indirect and highly symbolic way. In order to convey his own meanings he takes advantage of the one aspect of this foreign language that his colonial masters cannot control: its elusiveness, its wealth of connotations, its capabilities for symbolisation. In his attempt to articulate his despair and give an outlet to his revolutionary desire, the Negro poet practically invents poetry as the only means of literary expression that cannot be easily appropriated by the white man. This poet is the one who most acutely realises that "language is in essence prose, and that prose is in essence failure" (ibid, 303). As a result the poet reappropriates the language of the colonial master and by turning it into poetry throws it back at him in the hope of thus communicating the feelings and desires of his people. Since, Sartre says, "the oppressor is present in the very language" the poet "will speak this language in order to destroy it"(ibid, 303). This poetry born out of indignation, despair and the need to find a way through the constraints of a medium already

worked upon by one's enemies is for Sartre a truly revolutionary poetry that not only gives voice to the Other (in this case the colonial Other) but also carries forth his irreducible specificity and human dignity in all its variety and complexity.

In "Black Orpheus" Sartre elevates poetry to the status of a literary form which is well suited to the expression of the particularities of the colonial experience and the desire for emancipation. Paradoxically, Sartre, when confronted with a situation outside mainland France, found the idea of poetry articulating the deepest desires of a consciousness inspired by the possibility of human liberation more plausible.

In another article under the title "Why Write?", Sartre presents his famous argument about the reciprocity of free actions which the literary work of art inscribes in its very essence as a gift intended by one human being for another. Sartre makes the claim that "it is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind" (ibid, 51-52) and concludes by stating that "[t]here is no art except for and by others" (ibid, 52). The ontological constraints, imposed on man *qua* being-for-others, are now severely tested by a free will that discovers in its reciprocated act a bond that relates it intimately with another freedom. The writer by committing himself to writing makes an appeal to the freedom of another human being who in turn "collaborate[s] in the production of the work" (ibid, 54) by exercising that very freedom. This freedom is not any more the blind force that pushes man forward in his quest for an authentic existence but a more qualified, dialectical concept since it is "experienced not in the enjoyment of free subjective functioning, but in a creative act required by an imperative" (ibid, 56). The pessimistic assertions about the impossibility of maintaining a free existence in an essentially antagonistic world, which was partly the reason why *Being and Nothingness* was so violently criticised, have now given their place to a conception of human freedom born and maintained by another human freedom. The writer and the reader are now assigned the task of enacting the positive dimension of sociality and freedom that was absent

in the previous work. Instead of two antagonistic beings trying to negate each other's freedom even in a relation based on love we now have two partners who – as in all acts of love, sexual or otherwise – find their feelings of pleasure, joy or satisfaction intensified in direct proportion with the intensification of the respective feelings of the other. So, in literature, according to Sartre:

... the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of others, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return this confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognise that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him. (ibid, 58).

Such an exchange reaffirms the essential freedom that constitutes human beings and yet it is still a formal – from a moral point of view – exchange. What is missing is the teleological dimension which is given to us later on in the text by one of Sartre's most impressive statements. Sartre is acutely aware that leaving literature in its aesthetic dimension alone does nothing to secure the validity of the argument in favour of committed writing. For that one would need a further elaboration of the idea of reciprocated freedom. To this extent Sartre adds that although we must accept the fact that literature and morality are two distinct things we must at the same time understand that "at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative" (ibid, 67). This is presented as the logical conclusion of the previous statements. The act of appealing to the other's freedom is a moral act even it appears in a situation where the main object of interest is an aesthetic one (the literary work of art). It is the importance of the fact that there are human agents involved in this situation that gives it its moral quality but also – and here we observe the application of the criterion of universalizability that we mentioned earlier on – that freedom can only be an appeal of an

agent whose generosity must be, by virtue of its content, towards all men. Thus the immediate situation is transcended and the whole humanity appears on the horizon. For Sartre

It would be inconceivable that this unleashing of generosity provoked by the writer could be used to authorize an injustice, and that the reader could enjoy his freedom while reading a work which approves or accepts or simply abstains from condemning the subjection of man by man. (ibid, 67).

It could be argued that history has proved that literature can and has indeed been used for precisely these reasons, yet one must bear in mind that what Sartre is essentially saying here is that literature *ought not* to be like that, or in other words, that such a literature is simply tainted by bad faith and ultimately unworthy of its name. Literature, being an exercise in human freedom within the framework of a specific situation has, by virtue of this essential quality, universal human freedom as its most profound subject. Simply put, the writer is “a free man addressing free men, has only one subject – freedom” (ibid, 68). Sartre concludes his argument by stating that as literature – in its form as prose – is not only founded upon but ultimately also refers to human freedom it is thus “bound up with the only régime in which [it] has meaning, democracy” (ibid, 69). From the moral imperative of subjective generosity to the political imperative of a generalised practical freedom, from ontology and ethics to the ethico-political, such is the conceptual space covered here. This will lead us to Sartre’s next consideration which is the question of audience.

In “For Whom Does One Write?”, Sartre attempts to define the proper audience of writers in various historical periods and their function in relation to both the existing political order of each period and the audience for the benefit of which they produced their work. Sartre begins by acknowledging that what he has said so far describes an ideal rather than an actual situation. He claims that although writers implicitly call forth the universal humanity of

man in actual fact by virtue of the fact that they are situated in their time they only address specific audiences for specific reasons. For Sartre being situated “is an essential and necessary characteristic of freedom” (ibid, 133). As a consequence when one talks of freedom one should always bear in mind that this freedom only takes an intelligible form in concrete historical situations often against the forms sanctioned by the dominant ideology of the time under consideration. To engage with this precarious state of freedom, its formal universalizability and at the same time its historically-conditioned absence as an untranscendable end is one of the main features of committed writing. Another feature, and arguably more important from a political point of view, is the effort of the writer “to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked”, that is when he “causes the commitment of effective spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective” (ibid, 77). The committed writer must then start with freedom as potentially applicable to all but at the same time do all he can to throw light on the fact that this freedom is as yet only realized by the few. With this in mind the writer must resist alienation by submitting to either temporal powers or to an ideology (ibid, 134). In order to achieve this the committed writer must always consider his work not as a means but as an unconditioned end (ibid, 134). This line of thought betrays more than a hint of classical Kantian idealism and Sartre is careful to distance himself somewhat by stating that this should be considered more as an ideal situation than as a normative statement regarding the present situation. In support of this corrective judgement he later on states that “*actual* literature can only realize its full *essence* in a classless society” (ibid, 137). Still dangerously close to the idealist conception of literature as something belonging to the kingdom of ends and not to the one of means, Sartre at least manages to avoid blatant inconsistency between his obvious political motives and his argumentation by admitting that this kingdom of ends is far from being realized anytime soon. He concludes his article by admitting exactly this discrepancy between literature’s essence and the historical conjuncture he and others are forced to work within.

The impression that we are left with is that true literature is impossible and at the same time necessary and inevitable. As we will see later in our discussion of *Saint Genet* this same argument will be used in relation to morality and ethics.

In another article entitled “Situation of the Writer in 1947” Sartre goes on to examine the situation of the committed writer in the immediate post-war period. In this article, by and large, the most ‘historically situated’ of all, Sartre attempts a thoroughgoing examination of the constraints imposed on the writers of his generation by the exigencies of the era. The question of audience is again dealt with greater urgency, since it is now considered the most important aspect of the committed writer’s function in society. Having posited that “only in a socialist collectivity would literature (...) deserve the name of *total literature*” (ibid, 195), that is a literature that has “finally understood its essence” and has made “the synthesis of *praxis* and *exis*, of negativity and construction, of doing, having, and being” (ibid, 195) Sartre attempts to show how it is possible for those writing then (the mid-forties) to address the only public that would make their effort worthwhile from a political perspective. That public is, of course, the proletariat and Sartre makes a formidable effort to establish the viability of adopting such a perspective. For Sartre, writing for the bourgeoisie essentially amounts to condemning the writer and his work to reflect a partial image of the world and at the same time legitimize the oppression of the underprivileged classes. Therefore, the proper audience for a politically progressive writer ought to be part of the only class that has the power to bring about the total transformation of society. Yet this class, as Sartre admits, is, to a large extent, organised around the PCF<sup>73</sup> having entrusted its hopes to the party’s policies. Sartre, at that time, had no intention of even indirectly supporting the PCF so he was faced with the difficult task of proposing a third way between adherence to bourgeois values and subscribing to a Stalinist orthodoxy. The answer to the question whether a writer in his willingness to give voice to a socialist alternative should become a communist and still

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<sup>73</sup> Parti Communiste Français.



remain a writer is negative. Sartre is quite explicit about that. He holds that the PCF, although “progressive and revolutionary in its doctrine and in its avowed ends”, has nevertheless “become conservative in its means” (ibid, 207). For Sartre, the PCF, by virtue of its specific political function in the French society of the post-war era, cannot accommodate anyone who wishes to address others by affirming both his and their freedom at the same time. The writer must create his own audience through his work alone and if that audience ought to be the working class then its consciousness must be raised and its unity effected by the work itself. For Sartre the committed writers of his day “do not want their public (...) to be reduced to the juxtaposition of individual readers nor to have its unity conferred upon it by the transcendent action of a Party or a Church” (ibid, 221).

Between these two equally inadmissible alternatives the genuinely committed writer must, according to Sartre, “militate (...) in favour of the freedom of the person *and* the socialist revolution” (ibid, 223). He must achieve this by fulfilling a twofold function. In as far as his work addresses (enlightened) members of the bourgeoisie he must make them understand that “the reign of ends cannot be realized without revolution” (ibid, 222). In as far as his work addresses the proletariat he must make it understand that “revolution is conceivable only if it prepares the reign of ends” (ibid, 223). Thus at one stroke Kantianism is finally radicalized and Marxism is reminded of its vulgar past in order to reorient itself towards a more enlightened future. Sartre is still too much indebted to the subjectivist conception of freedom to allow himself a truly dialectical understanding between means and ends. His integrity and commitment make him all too aware of the essentially self-defeating character of Kantian ethics and his insistence on freedom as predicated upon the individual agent makes him treat the question of means and ends in the context of revolutionary socialism in a way more suitable to a left-libertarian view than a properly Marxist one. His allusions to the hypocrisy inherent in all bourgeois conceptions of morality are always nothing less than inspiring and his refutation of bourgeois idealism on grounds of both ideological consistency

and political effectiveness is excellent and yet the dialectics of revolutionary struggle and ethics seems to be still in a nascent state. His pronouncement that the committed writer “must judge the means not from the point of view of an abstract morality”, but “in the perspectives of a precise goal which is the realization of a socialist democracy”, is an admirably honest self-criticism of Sartre himself, the apolitical writer and *philosophe* of the pre-War period; it is also a heart-felt appeal to the writers of his generation to realise the means of transcending their class-affiliations. His statement that man is always a value regardless of what else he might also be is to be understood in the context of his existential-political thesis that the “present situation, by virtue of the fact that it is unbearable, remains in a state of stagnation because men have dispossessed themselves of their own destiny” (ibid, 234). It seems that in this sorry state of affairs the writer is and must be assuming the responsibility of changing this in favour of the dispossessed.

In “Writing for One’s Age” Sartre reiterates his argument on the historical specificity or situatedness of the writer. But this situatedness should not be considered as an untranscendable given. The writer must constantly attempt to go beyond it on the basis of the understanding that “real transcendence requires one to want to change certain specific aspects of the world” and that his practice must be “coloured and particularized by the concrete situation it aims to modify” (ibid, 243). This imperative to concern oneself with the present and not lose oneself in a seemingly noble but ultimately misguided and false contemplation of an atemporal world is what Sartre has in mind in proclaiming that he and others like him “stand for an ethics and art of the finite” (ibid, 245). In the article that introduced *Les Temps Modernes* Sartre had used this same argument only this time with a strong metaphysical undercurrent. Risking yet another lapse into idealism, he asserted there that the writer, having committed himself to the singularity of his era and all that this entails, was in fact making “contact with the eternal”, and that his task as writer was “to allow the eternal values implicit in such and such social or political debates to be perceived” (ibid, 254).

He quickly added that these values are “of interest only in their contemporary guise” (ibid, 254). Is it possible to regard something as eternal and yet take interest only in its historically specific form? If something is only pertinent to us because of its specificity, and if moreover this specificity is the only thing that we are able to verify, why should we allow the postulation of an atemporal essence? Sartre answers these questions by revisiting his favoured ontological themes. Man, he insists, is not an atemporal essence but an absolute in a certain historical time, in a certain context. Man is absolute in his irreducible specificity, in his ability to choose his world within the larger framework of history. Man is not reducible to anything other than himself, he remains, even after all is said and done, an original project that has only one meaning: freedom, man’s ultimate justification as being-in-the-world. This is the one aspect of the human condition that literature must bring to the foreground. It must always, according to Sartre, elucidate the conditions of possibility of this freedom, while at the same time safeguarding its radical irreducibility. Sartre clearly wishes that freedom should be understood as something valid *absolutely* and not *relatively* and for this reason he turns against those who, while admitting the injustices present in their time, do precious little to effectively abolish these injustices. Freedom may inhere in man being essentially coterminous with his very existence, and yet it is conspicuous by its absence in a great part of the human population either because of the colour of their skin or because of their relation to the means of production. For that reason alone the existential postulate of the primacy of freedom necessitates the moral condemnation of whatever negates this freedom. Consequently, given the imperative to always turn one’s attention to the specific, concrete situations in history this moral condemnation leads to a political problematic and ultimately to the assumption of political responsibility. At the end when one sees that those who are mostly affected by this lack of freedom are the proletariat the only sound conclusion is the commitment to the socialist transformation of society.

This ensemble of texts all written in the mid to late forties provides us with the main theoretical concepts of Sartre's early literary criticism. These are of course the concepts of commitment, reciprocated freedom as the foundation of the literary phenomenon, and historical situatedness of the writer. They all signify a transition from the rather gloomy ontology of *Being and Nothingness* to a political awareness that necessitates a literature – and by extension a critical practice – based on the concept of *praxis*. Sartre would eventually base his entire work on this concept. I shall deal with the specificity of this concept in the context of Sartre's work later in my discussion but what I would like to emphasize here is that *praxis* not only marks a transition from a theoretical to a political philosophy but, more crucially, it also functions as a master-concept in which all the disparate elements of Sartre's thought are fused: subjectivity and objectivity, freedom and historically imposed constraints, ontological uncertainty and the ethico-political surpassing of this uncertainty. What is initiated here is not a merely conceptual accomplishment but a meeting between consciousness and history, an attempt to reconcile the demands of personal freedom with a political cause that transcends this freedom. It is this transcendence inherent in the notion of *praxis* that animates and gives substance to Sartrean commitment. Individual freedom does not cancel itself out by clashing with the freedom of the other but transcends itself towards something far greater than it and thus affirms and justifies itself in precisely that transcendence. This transcendence is not towards an ideal, ahistorical end but towards a concrete solution to pressing present problems. It is to Sartre's merit that he avoided as best as he could the lapse into an idealistic and thus ineffective solution to the problems he identified in the social and political reality of his time. Sartrean commitment predicated upon the free non-alienated *praxis* of the individual is pointing to one direction: the socialist transformation of society. This is to come about through *practical* activity and it is the emphasis on 'practical' that makes his whole critical practice so important. There are of course questions that are raised and need to be answered. Why is the writer, given Sartre's misgivings about PCF's political ethos, deemed as

the privileged one who will take it upon him to spread the revolutionary word to the masses? Would the insistence on the irreducible freedom of the individual not eventually clash with the exigencies of organised political action? Sartre was still too much indebted to the individualism of his early philosophy to seriously contemplate an ethics or more specifically a radical critical practice that would not be based on individuals but on collectivities. Before addressing these issues in detail I wish to proceed with the examination of some of the critical works Sartre wrote in the years following the publication of the texts I discussed above. My main focus will be his three early literary biographies, namely the ones of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Genet.

#### LITERARY BIOGRAPHY AS EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

Sartre's first literary biography was his book on Baudelaire published in 1947. In writing this book Sartre attempted for the first time to apply some sort of a revised psychoanalytic method which he called 'existential psychoanalysis'. By that he meant a method that would engage with the fundamental choices of a person in the context of his 'freedom' to think and pursue his own projects. In his examination of Baudelaire Sartre tries to identify and discuss the strategies the former has chosen in becoming what he eventually became most famous for: a poet. Sartre examines Baudelaire as a man who "pursued the impossible life of self-creation" (Sartre, 1949: 151) and that phrase gives us a pretty clear indication of the fundamental premise of this biography, namely that a man creates his own destiny merely by willing his own particular mode of living. This essentially idealistic form of understanding another subjectivity testifies to the fact that Sartre was still very much thinking in accordance with his earlier subjectivist philosophy. But *Baudelaire* testifies to something else too: Sartre's main preoccupation was to (re)construct in biographical form the struggle for authenticity, an essential moral struggle not because it is oriented towards the Good but because at every stage it involves choices and acts that have to do with the accepted moral codes of the era

under examination. The moral element implied in such treatment is of great importance for my discussion here. *Baudelaire* is the first of Sartre's works in which the biographical treatment of a literary figure attempts to elucidate the moral problematic of the itinerary of the whole life under scrutiny. By moral problematic I mean the specific ideas, or in some cases, the concepts which animate what in Sartre's terminology we would call the individual life-projects of the biographees. This moral element in *Baudelaire* is made apparent every time Sartre discusses the particular incidents of Baudelaire's life that eventually lead the latter in adopting a specific aesthetics and artistic practice which will produce the *Fleurs du mal*. In *Baudelaire* Sartre seems to insist on his belief that "the free choice which a man makes of himself is completely identified with what is called his destiny" (Sartre, 1949: 185). Although Sartre acknowledges the defining force of the environment, his *Baudelaire* is without a doubt a typically existentialist biography, in the sense that individual freedom is still viewed as essentially inalienable and, in some sense, as the main motor of individual history.

After Baudelaire Sartre began to work on Mallarmé but unfortunately the bulk of his notes were either destroyed or lost. What remained was a handful of them that were published after Sartre's death. *Mallarmé* does not differ significantly from *Baudelaire* in its tenor and argument. The individual life-project of Mallarmé the poet is presented to us as a series of choices that are essentially reactions to given situations, both personal and political<sup>74</sup>. Sartre attempts here, as he did in *Baudelaire*, to account for the life-process of his subject by applying a phenomenological reading of the biographical data he has at hand. He clearly wishes not only to understand his subject but to be also able to account for the specificity of his life-choices in an effort to bestow a certain meaning to the life and work of Mallarmé. The meaning I am alluding to is the one conferred to every series of actions or reactions that can be viewed as a 'project'. By that I mean that in attempting "to recover the restless inner movements of a reflexive consciousness" (Sartre, 1988: 8) Sartre is also

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<sup>74</sup> The first chapter under the title "The Atheist Heritage" provides the wider historical context within which we are to situate Mallarmé, his life and his poetry.

attempting to re-construct a life, as a series of conscious choices that all lead to an identifiable end which is none other than this very life seen as 'necessary' and not 'contingent'. In these biographies he puts to the test the latent imperative of *Being and Nothingness*, namely that one should act as though one's life is endowed with meaning which one alone can give it. By keeping a certain (crude) Marxist problematic at arm's length Sartre still attempts to account for the force exerted by society and more generally history. Yet, his essentially subjectivist and idealistic premise of the individual endowed with a pre-reflective consciousness of his own fundamental life-choices did not go very well together with his newly acquired sensitivity to the external, non-ontological restraints imposed on man. *Malarmé* was Sartre's first attempt to negotiate a relation between the sovereign subjectivity of man and its crippling environment but the fragmentary nature of this work means that we have to turn to the *Family Idiot* to find a thorough treatment of this relation. But before I turn my attention to the this last of Sartre's works I must discuss his other literary biography of the period which takes as its subject the controversial author Jean Genet.

In 1952 Sartre publishes *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, where he attempts to interpret Jean Genet's work in terms of the latter's 'original project'; that is his choice to embody the conception that his society (through his foster parents) had of him. Genet chose to be what others thought him to be and since what the others thought was that he was 'bad' Genet chose evil as his only option to pursue his freedom and thus 'became' his own singular personality. Yet through that process Genet realised that his chosen path lead him not only to the necessity of realizing absolute evil but also to the gradual realization that this evil was intimately connected with an aesthetics of the ugly and the vile. Which is to say: transposition into poetry of his own imaginary that was haunted by negativity (Sartre, 1971: 160). This complicity of evil and a certain aesthetics gave Genet the chance to narrate his life and thus elucidate the specificity of his own destiny. The reader<sup>75</sup>, an integral part of the society that

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<sup>75</sup> I am of course referring to the reader who is contemporaneous to the work.

stigmatised Genet, ultimately comes face-to-face with this narrativised evil and sees in it the reflected image of his own mean-spiritedness and hypocrisy because this evil is his, it originated in his bourgeois bad faith and is now returned to him enhanced and crystallised.

What is strikingly original in *Saint Genet* is that for the first time Sartre seems to acknowledge the decisive role of the environment and the defining influence of the family in the development of the individual. For the first time we are made to understand that what an individual does is as much the product of his initial 'existential' project as it is the product of a myriad of actions, of situations and of social, political, economic and ideological structures. Consequently, one, following Sartre in *Saint Genet*, is less likely to treat the individual in the absolutist terms Sartre himself treated it in his previous works. What is brought to the surface in *Saint Genet* is the complex dialectics of individuality and social structures. What is of particular interest in that foregrounding is the extensive use of ethical language that Sartre uses throughout the work. This emphasis makes *Saint Genet* a prototypical piece of ethical criticism, one that engages with the ethical level of the narrative under examination without being guided by the sort of short-sighted normative principles that so often transform similar critiques into moralising platitudes. Sartre investigates the ethical repercussions of Genet's fundamental choice of life and his narrative allows the original text to reveal the underlying moral battles, dilemmas, and failures that animate it. This process presents Genet as a figure trying to resolve the inherent (unsurpassable) difficulties of opting for evil as the modality of his being-in-the-world by consistently striving to enact the most disturbing aspects of that evil. Since for Sartre evil is non-Being, complete nothingness given that good is complete plenitude, Genet is presented as attempting to assert being by non-being, to attain a singular freedom through the nihilation of being, which means transforming "acts into gestures, being into imaginary, the world into phantasmagoria and himself into an appearance" (ibid, 161). The poetic resolution of the problems that his freedom has posed for him is now appearing as a viable alternative. Genet's literature is born out of the impossibility to find



shelter even in the most remote areas of evil since this evil ultimately destroys even itself *qua* absolute evil<sup>76</sup>. By writing Genet manages to rescue and finally assert his existence and incorporate his whole life into his original project. His value is his singularity, his refusal to be consumed by evil, his determination to come back and haunt us by using one of the most effective weapons in our arsenal, namely bourgeois morality; precisely what haunted his entire life. At the end Genet manages to emerge victorious even if that victory is only verbal.<sup>77</sup>

*Saint Genet* is a unique book in many respects. On the one hand it offers us a formidable application of the peculiarly Sartrean methodology of existential biography announcing *The Family Idiot* some twenty years later. This brilliantly applied phenomenological criticism, which implicitly criticizes the two methodologies that cast their shadow in virtually every work of Sartre, namely Marxism and psychoanalysis<sup>78</sup>, interprets everything from the point of view of the subjectivity<sup>79</sup> behind artistic creation. On the other hand *Saint Genet* is a polemical text of ethical criticism since its subject matter is a writer who, as a person, is in many ways the exact antithesis of the sort of writer that is guaranteed a place in the (bourgeois) canon of French letters. Genet was a thief and a homosexual and his chosen life had pushed him to the outer margins of the 'civilized society' of his time. By so closely attending to Genet's (moral and aesthetic) choices Sartre makes a radical gesture that is in itself even more important than the content of the book through which it is made. This sympathetic yet critical<sup>80</sup> reading of a marginal and even menacing subjectivity puts the radical, anti-systemic

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<sup>76</sup> Sartre expresses much the same when he says that "it was the impossibility of living that made Genet" (ibid, 570) meaning Genet the writer, the artist.

<sup>77</sup> The penultimate chapter of the book is entitled "My Victory is Verbal and I Owe It to the Sumptuousness of the Terms".

<sup>78</sup> In the last chapter of the book entitled "Please Use Genet Properly" Sartre states his intention in writing this book by making a specific negative reference to both Marxism and psychoanalysis right at the beginning of the first paragraph.

<sup>79</sup> The extent to which this subjectivity is fully transparent to itself is not absolutely clear. Sartre, the Romantic often, even in *Saint Genet*, seems to imply that it is. Later on in his life Sartre will be more hesitant in asserting that consciousness is fully conscious of itself.

<sup>80</sup> Sartre is never duped into glorifying the exotic other-worldliness of Genet's life-style. More specifically, when it comes to the latter's implicit moral choices Sartre makes clear that Genet's evil is the negative complement of the bourgeois good that ostracized him in the first place. Many years later he will mention Genet in *The Family*

orientation of the intellectual Sartre into relief and will eventually inspire others to pursue this critical ethos even further.<sup>81</sup>

*Saint Genet* is far more interesting and rewarding than *Baudelaire* and *Mallarmé*, as it shows Sartre at his best trying to reconstruct and justify the whole complex of events that make up another human being's life. Even if the dialectical relation of history and subjectivity is still only schematically theorised the first step towards a totalising, unitary conception has been put firmly in place. Later on, a more dialectical approach to the relation between history and individual destiny will emerge as a result of Sartre's more serious engagement with Marxism.

#### AN APPRAISAL OF SARTRE'S MID-PERIOD WRITINGS

One cannot be [morally] converted alone. In other words,  
ethics is not possible unless everyone is ethical.

*Notebooks for an Ethics*

Sartre's early literary theory and criticism is made intelligible through the concepts elaborated during the early phase of his philosophical career. *What is Literature?* may be conceptually founded on the concepts of radical freedom and responsibility and yet another dimension begins to appear in this work, one that will eventually lead Sartre to address the question of history which is so conspicuously absent from his early work. This dimension is the product of the further elaboration of the concept of 'situation', the gradual transition from a purely phenomenological description and understanding of 'events' and 'situations' to one which acknowledges explicitly the framework of history and its determining role in the articulation of individual projects. Sartre's abrupt awakening from his earlier state of political

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*Idiot* and he will have this to say: "...by declaring that he was *the* Thief and pledging himself to evil, Genet did nothing more than recognize the absolute primacy of the values in whose name he was condemned." (Sartre 1987: 175).

<sup>81</sup> The founding text of the anti-psychiatry movement (Roland Laing and David Cooper's *Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre's Philosophy 1950-1960*) deals extensively (the whole second chapter) with *Saint Genet*.

quietism in the years before the war had profound effects in his subsequent formulation of the fundamental questions regarding human life. One such first attempt to rethink and adjust his conception of freedom<sup>82</sup> is his concept of 'situation' which allowed Sartre to see man's actions as always happening in concrete, historically determined circumstances with a particular, historically determined, aim as their inherent finality. By allowing such a generous concession to historical forces Sartre could address some specific ethical issues in a manner that his earlier ontological work could not.

One of these specific ethical issues is the relation of the writer and his public through the mediation of the literary work.. I have already described this relation as it was envisioned by Sartre but what I wish to emphasize here is the essentially moral quality of this reciprocal bond between writer and reader. It is this moral conception of two 'absolutely' free agents, taking part in a process of mutual recognition and justification that marks Sartre's early theory; and it is precisely this moral outlook that proves to be the most problematic element in this otherwise brave and occasionally brilliant book. that is *What is Literature?*. I say problematic because although it was Sartre's intention to propose a political, as well as an aesthetic, alternative to the hitherto prevalent forms of writing what he offered in the end only partially succeeded in developing a fully fledged political theory of literature. The reason is that, in agreement with his main philosophical premises, Sartre posited the absolute and irreducible freedom of the individual agents involved in the production-consumption process of literature. It was this continually affirmed ontological status of a free subjectivity addressing another free subjectivity that not only denied the psychological complexities of any situated consciousness (his adamant refusal of any unconscious determining factor such as repressed desire, the correlation of such a desire with power etc.) but also denied or rather

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<sup>82</sup> It has to be said at this point that a lot of the controversy caused by the early Sartrean notion of 'freedom' is due to the specific content of that notion in *Being and Nothingness* which more or less equates it with absolute transcendence, and more specifically the movement from what is (the domain of ontology) to what is not (the domain of (a normative) ethics). For a critical discussion of Sartrean 'freedom' see Thomas Anderson, 1979 & 1993, Detmer, 1988 & Stone 1985.

evaded the social complexities of the interaction of agents within the framework of collectivities ridden with power struggles. That is not to say that Sartre fell prey to a mystificatory idealism nor that he wished to keep silent about the pressing political issues that his literary theory clearly wished to address. It is rather to say that he was – due to the fact that his philosophy was still being very much dominated by the idea of the Cartesian cogito – compelled to think of both writer and reader in an ambivalent fashion paradigmatically expressed when he treated the former as thoroughly situated in history and thus structurally dependent on it and at the same time as someone who by writing a book appeals to the freedom of other men who in turn must, by accepting his offering, affirm his and their freedom as well. While in *Being and Nothingness* such an insistence on inalienable freedom might have seemed consistent with his ahistorical treatment of being in *What is Literature?* the relation that was established between history and individual freedom seemed somewhat forced and certainly underspecified. The thrust of the argument then was not a clear exposition of how this purely ontological freedom can co-exist with the exigencies of history but rather a formulation of a new categorical imperative only this time in ethico-aesthetic terms. What this entailed was that the politically progressive elements in Sartre's thought, manifest and beyond doubt though they might have been, they sprung from a conception of the human that was *pre*-historical and which never really dealt with the messy nature of actual history. Being an ontological feature human freedom was inassimilable to history, unmodifiable and always there even if its practical, actual manifestation was nowhere to be seen or experienced. The consequence of such a view was that Sartre's unflinching dedication to socialism seemed to emanate not so much from the actuality of human existence but rather from its potentiality, that is the (abstract) possibility of freedom inherent in it. This uneasy relationship between an idealist premise and its politically charged

consequences in Sartre's early critical practice is, I think, what gives his work its distinctive moral tone.<sup>83</sup>

Another problematical element in Sartre's thought during this period was the role of the writer in society. In *What is Literature?*, one may read Sartre attributing more importance to the political efficacy of the writer than a historically informed dialectical analysis would allow for. Mark Poster has argued that Sartre was at that time "assuming for literature (...) the mantle of social change" and by implication "assuming for himself the role of revolutionary leader" (Poster, 1975: 137). This Romantic notion of the liberative function of the writer was still a feature of a bourgeois worldview, radical perhaps but idealist nevertheless. Sartre was, during the forties, clearly unable to detect the strong idealist current in his work that jeopardised the effectiveness of his overall argument in favour of a socialist politics. Some twenty years later Sartre would reconsider the role of the intellectual in society and propose a radically different view on the subject, one that would avoid much of the idealist overtones of his earlier thought. In his "A Plea for Intellectuals" (1965)<sup>84</sup> Sartre still asserted that the intellectual<sup>85</sup>, by virtue of the nature of the contradictions inherent in his class position, is obliged

to commit himself in every one of the conflicts of our time, because all of them - class, national, and racial conflicts - are particular effects of the oppression of the under-privileged and because, in each of these conflicts, he finds himself, as a man conscious of his own oppression, on the side of the oppressed. (Sartre, 1972: 254)

What we have here is the re-affirmation of the radical role which the intellectual is called to play and in fact the whole text follows the same line of argument as the texts in *What is*

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<sup>83</sup> Fredric Jameson has also argued that Sartrean commitment is "an ethical category long before it is a political one" (Jameson, 1971: 279).

<sup>84</sup> A series of three lectures delivered by Sartre at Tokyo and Kyoto in September-October 1965.

<sup>85</sup> For Sartre, by definition *petit-bourgeois* and potentially radical.

*Literature?* only this time with a Marxist terminology and a far more explicit acknowledgement of the contradictory nature of the intellectual's role. What is particularly important though is that in the late sixties Sartre is too conscious (to the point of presenting a rather pessimistic picture) of the impossibility of the intellectual unequivocally offering himself to the struggle of the working class as the gap that divides the two is unbridgeable and no moral or political 'good intentions' are sufficient for such a crossing over. In a statement that is most illuminating as well as painfully autobiographical Sartre asserts that

if petty-bourgeois intellectuals are led by their own contradictions to align themselves with the working class, they will serve it at their risk and peril; they may act as theorists but never as organic intellectuals of the proletariat, and this contradiction, no matter how well it may be understood, will never be resolved. (ibid, 159).

What appeared in *What is Literature?* as too much indebted to the Romantic revolutionism of the nineteenth century was now presented in full acknowledgement of the political exigencies of the class struggle. The intellectual and by extension theory and literature are still 'condemned' to assert, promote and safeguard freedom from all kinds of oppression but they can no longer take the place of a proper political action organized by those most affected by injustice.

#### BEYOND LITERATURE: TOWARDS A DIALECTICAL SYNTHESIS OF INDIVIDUAL AND HISTORY

Eight years after the publication of *Saint Genet* Sartre published his second major philosophical work under the title *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In fact only the first volume of the work – *Theory of Practical Ensembles* – was published while the second – *The Intelligibility of History* – was effectively abandoned by Sartre and was published after his death. This work was the product of a decade-long close relationship with Marxism not only in its

institutionalised form, the PCF but also with Marxist theory itself. Following his spectacular and controversial public support for the PCF with the publication of *The Communists and the Peace* in 1952 and his equally spectacular, yet less controversial, condemnation of USSR policy and eventual distancing from the PCF with the publication of *The Ghost of Stalin* in 1957 the *Critique* is a major attempt to reconceptualise the relation of subject and history through an extremely rigorous application of the dialectical method to the issues under consideration. These are philosophical issues such as, for example, the relation of analytical with dialectical reason and the relation of dialectics with history; political and historical issues such as the structure of mass-movements and their eventual decline, the structure of collectives such as the series, the fused, and the institutionalised group. Yet the main task of this work is above all to develop a critical method that would eventually make history intelligible. Intelligible in the sense of being transparent to dialectical reason, which alone, according to Sartre, can help us comprehend the process of never-ending totalisations and retotalisations of both individual and collective actions. In this process of constant dialectical transformation the individual as agent on the one hand and history on the other are at all times worked upon by each other in a continuous process which, in its entirety, is nothing but the movement of human history itself. This human history is still founded on the individual which, through his inalienable and irreducible subjectivity, is still considered the primal element which sets everything else in motion. However, this individual is now presented in a manner quite different from the way it was conceived and presented in Sartre's earlier works. Whereas earlier the Cartesian cogito apprehends itself as being-for-itself, thrown into a world which is devoid of meaning and thus essentially hostile and unstable now the individual, as previously conceived

disappears from historical categories: alienation, the practico-inert, series, groups, classes, the components of History, labour, individual and communal *praxis* – the individual has lived, and he

still lives, all of these in interiority. But if there is a movement of dialectical Reason, it is this movement which produces his life, this membership of a particular class, of certain milieux and of certain groups. (Sartre, 1976: 51)

Since it is the movement of history that effectively ‘produces’ the individual he must proceed in his understanding of his whole situation “so as to deny its distinctiveness” and “to seek its dialectical intelligibility within human development as a whole” (ibid, 51). History becomes the outer limit of intelligibility of the human situation and the being-for-itself is now by virtue of its historicity a component, albeit an active and important one, of something infinitely larger than itself. Yet history itself is not self-produced but created through the ever-repeated totalisations of individual actions. It is still men who make history even with the crucial qualification – itself borrowed from Marx – that what they make is under circumstances that they have not chosen. If history has triumphantly entered Sartre’s political philosophy it is for one reason only: to show that the individual makes no sense without history and that history itself is unintelligible if it is not predicated on the actions of living men. The repercussions of such a dialectical conception of subjectivity and history will be – as we shall see later on in *The Family Idiot* – far reaching for Sartre’s literary criticism.

The whole breadth of the *Critique* is enormous and therefore I shall examine only what is relevant to the questions I wish to address. For that I shall turn my attention to the question of ethics as this is dealt with in this work. The *Critique* is not a treatise on ethics nor does it specifically address problems on the ethical level. It is an attempt to establish, on a grand scale, a philosophical basis for any future anthropology<sup>86</sup> providing a unique vocabulary, a well-defined aim and a methodology that – as Sartre himself claimed<sup>87</sup> – would place existential philosophy firmly in place within a broader Marxist framework. Because of that

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<sup>86</sup> In the non-technical, general sense of ‘science of man’.

<sup>87</sup> “I regard Marxism as the untranscendable philosophy for our time, and I believe that the ideology of existence, along with its ‘comprehensive’ method, is an enclave within Marxism itself, both produced and rejected by Marxism” (ibid, 822).



the moral problematic of the *Critique* is to a large extent implicit in the statements about human collectivities and the *telos* of history. Yet, there are certain explicit statements about ethics and morality that provide the general framework within which one should understand the ethical moment in human history. The first appearance of ethics in the *Critique* is in a chapter about matter and more particularly at the point when Sartre introduces one of his very important new concepts, namely scarcity. According to Sartre ethics is constituted as a discreet level of human life only in situations where scarcity prevails, and as scarcity in Sartre's admittedly controversial anthropology is the founding relation of man and matter ethics is presented as a futile attempt to rationalize and consequently handle a situation of global insecurity and intense antagonism. It is worth quoting Sartre at some length here:

The first movement of ethics, (...) is the constitution of radical evil and of Manichaeism; it values and evaluates the breaking of the reciprocity of immanence by interiorised scarcity (...) but only by conceiving it as a product of the *praxis* of the Other. The anti-human (*le contre-homme*) in fact tries to destroy men by sharing their ends and adopting their means. The break occurs the moment this deceptive reciprocity reveals the deadly danger which it contains, or, in other words, when it reveals that it is impossible for *all* those bound by reciprocal links to stay on the soil which supports and feeds them. And let us not make the mistake of thinking that this interiorised impossibility characterises individuals subjectively; on the contrary it makes everyone *objectively dangerous* for the Other and makes the concrete existence of each individual endanger that of the Other. Thus man is *objectively* constituted as non-human, and this non-humanity is expressed in *praxis* by the perception of evil as the structure of the Other. (ibid, 132).

Sidestepping for the moment the question regarding the validity of postulating such a human condition what immediately strikes us here is the fact that human beings are, by virtue of their inhabiting an earth with scarce resources, *objectively dangerous* for each other. That means that whatever the feelings towards others may be from a subjective point of view the condition of alterity is found not in the dark recesses of the human soul or in the

ontological nature of our being as he claimed in *Being and Nothingness* but in the very structure of material existence. The path to a materialistic conception of ethics is now wide open, and unavoidably the initial question is posed even more urgently. Why is it that the initial state of man is only conceivable within the context of scarcity? Surely the alternative of plenitude would equally make sense especially when one is implicitly referring to a primal state of humankind and not necessarily to a state in recent recorded history. Also, one could argue with equal conviction that what in fact happened was that an original state contained both possibilities at once. Both plenitude and scarcity could be then conceived as the two basic modalities of a chosen way of life depending on a combination of other factors which although ultimately related to matter would not be directly attributable to one of its perceived aspects. In other words one could argue that nature is neither governed by the laws of scarcity nor does it conversely offer everything in abundance, but rather enters into the sphere of human interest (always) under very specific conditions. Scarcity need not be considered inescapable but this issue falls beyond the scope of my discussion<sup>88</sup>. Sartre himself gives no justification for his axiomatic positing of scarcity<sup>89</sup> as ultimately determining human relations but he does give us some extremely evocative sentences about the relation between man and his worst enemy: himself-as-other. Nothing, he declares, “could be more terrifying for man than a species which is intelligent, carnivorous and cruel, and which can understand and outwit human intelligence, and whose aim is precisely the destruction of man” (ibid, 132). This species is of course none other than the human species in the context of scarcity. Such a relation only results in conflict and the imperative to fight for survival. For Sartre, this imperative to engage in deadly combat with the other is the manifest form of any ethics

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<sup>88</sup> For a wider discussion of this and other related concepts see Lukes (1985) especially ch. 3. The footnote in page 32 is especially informative in its attempt to remind us of the possible meanings of scarcity in the context of political economy.

<sup>89</sup> Sartre does make certain allowances regarding the possibility of scarcity not being a basic feature of *all* possible human existence but he insists that *our* history is one determined by scarcity. (pp. 123-124). However, the question that still remains unanswered is, as Christina Howells formulates it, whether scarcity “reflects need or greed?” (Howells, 1988: 104). For a more detailed discussion see also Aronson, 1980 and Poster, 1979.

functioning under the law of scarcity. Ethics is now conceived not as the general abstract form of a categorical imperative but as “the form of the destructive imperative” (ibid, 133); evil in this situation is conceived only so that it may be destroyed. In contradistinction to the greater number of moral theories that either explicitly or implicitly start from a conception of good in order to arrive at a conception of bad or evil Sartre maintains that ethics in a condition of scarcity can only and does indeed start from a conception of evil as radical (and threatening) alterity. This is, according to him, an ideological trap of gigantic proportions. It is nothing more than the transformation of natural constraints into inescapable natural facts and it presupposes “a suffered distance, a lived impotence, and, in a way, the discovery of scarcity as destiny – in short, a veritable domination of man by the interiorised material environment” (ibid, 134). This last sentence holds the key for Sartre’s new conception of ethics as the result – a kind of defence mechanism – that is produced by the sheer incapability of man to rationally administer and control his natural resources. The more man is mystified by matter the more the latter comes back to haunt him as the inescapable fate of relative or absolute deprivation and the need to fight in order to survive. The more man allows himself to be dominated by matter the more he considers his own species as potential enemies and not as potential allies. This transition from an idealistic conception of ethics based on the irreducibility of human freedom to a materialistic one based on the structure of matter is the one most decisive advance in Sartre’s long engagement with the problem of morality. Yet it must be noted that freedom in its Sartrean conception is still operative as a concept in all his statements about ethics. Through a series of extremely detailed arguments he states that the violence I alluded to earlier, “is *always* both a reciprocal recognition of freedom and a negation (either reciprocal or univocal) of this freedom through the intermediary of the inertia of exteriority” (ibid, 736). The reciprocal violence of man in a context of scarcity is still postulated on them being essentially free, as, according to Sartre, only free men can choose to destroy or oppress one another. Speaking about the particular

violence suffered by the proletariat Sartre reaffirms this by stating that even this “does not eliminate freedom (...); it makes freedom its accomplice while allowing it no option but obedience” (ibid, 737). This allows for an even more nuanced conception of ethics according to which not only need and scarcity but also freedom, perpetually affirmed and negated at the same time, are the main defining elements of worldly morality.

This still general, anthropological view of ethics is often restated, in the course of the book, with regard to specific aspects or periods of human history. In one of these instances Sartre claims that ethics in its most basic form as a system of values alienates human praxis itself and not merely the aims or the objective results of that praxis. As a result

(...) freedom as a human relation reveals itself, in the world of exploitation and oppression, in opposition to this world and as a negation of the inhuman *through values*, and (...) it reveals itself there as alienated and loses itself in it and (...) *by means of values*, it realises nevertheless the untranscendable exigency imposed on it by practico-inert being, while still contributing to an organisation which carries within it the possibilities of reorganising the practico-inert field (ibid, 249n)

What is said here is that ethics, despite the fact that it alienates the most precious resource of humankind, praxis itself, is by virtue of the structure of our world the only means through which man is able to articulate his desire for a transcendence of that particular structure. The thing that enslaves man is the one thing that he uses to deliver himself from that slavery. This is a vicious circle where two antithetical but complementary aspects of the ethical moment work both against and with him in the process of transforming matter into goods and nature into culture. What is of the utmost importance here is the allusion to the inevitability of ethics in a world which has not yet managed to radically transform itself as well as matter in such a way as to allow praxis, that is free, constructive, uninhibited human activity to “be revealed as the sole ethical relation between people in so far as together they

dominate matter” (ibid, 249n). In the absence of such a world, at this point in Sartre’s thought given explicitly in the form of a communist collectivity, the system of moral values that we come to recognize as our morality is bound to found new systems and at the same time transcend them towards other systems in a never-ending process.

Every system of values rests on exploitation and oppression; every system of values effectively negates exploitation and oppression (...); every system of values confirms exploitation and oppression (...); every system of values, in so far as it is based on a social practice, contributes directly or indirectly to establishing devices and apparatuses which, when the time comes (...) will allow *this* particular oppression and exploitation to be negated; every system of values, at the moment of its revolutionary efficacy, ceases to be a system, and values cease to be values: their character was due to the fact that they could not be transcended; and circumstances, overthrowing structures, institutions and exigencies, transform them into transcended significations: systems are reabsorbed into the organisations which they have created and the organisations transformed by the overthrow of the social field, integrate themselves into new collective actions, carried out in the context of the new exigencies; and they disclose new values.

(ibid, 249n)

If that is what actually happens then it seems that there is no reason not to accept the possibility – as Sartre clearly does – of putting an end to this vicious circle by reaffirming the essential unity between praxis and value. But would that effectively break the vicious circle or would it found a new radically different system of values from the ones we have known thus far? Would that finally free man from the tyranny of various ethical systems always tacitly complicit with the dominant order?

By the time he was writing the *Critique*, Sartre was well aware of the necessity to distinguish between ethics in general and bourgeois ethics. Given his still active faith in the centrality of the individual in the process of history, it was natural that the ethical problem would be high in his priorities even if the current dominant form of moral thought

emanating from capitalist relations of production and bourgeois ideology is rejected. By identifying bourgeois humanism “as solidified ideological violence” (ibid, 753) Sartre was pointing to the impossibility of adopting this ideology and this ethics as a starting point for the elaboration of any revolutionary theory. However, he was also well aware that until this revolutionary theory is put into practice, and until this practice has the desired results, we should never shy away from the major ethical issues that are part and parcel of our being-in-the-world. His scattered statements in the *Critique* regarding all these questions do not lead to a comprehensive moral theory nor do they enable us to say what would be the precise nature of an ethics based on the free, non-alienated praxis of all men. What they do enable us to see is that any questions about existing ethical systems must always – if they claim to be pointing towards a dialectical understanding of our world – take into consideration the existing power relations, the fact of the unequal distribution of wealth, and the alienated character of every human praxis under condition of domination and oppression. They also enable us to understand that any questions about future ethical systems are – at the present time at least – essentially philosophical questions and not practical ones. To become practical, the various structures (ideological, economic, political and social) that are the foundation and ultimate justification of those systems need to be radically transformed prior to any normative consideration of ethics.

If the *Critique* gave us only the general philosophical problematic and did not offer anything specific about ethics and revolutionary morality in particular his subsequent work showed a renewed interest in the question of ethics and its relation to Marxism. His lecture on ethics at the Instituto Gramsci (1964)<sup>90</sup> and his planned but never actually delivered lecture at Cornell University (1965)<sup>91</sup> are exemplary in this respect for they clearly show the

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<sup>90</sup> Lecture given at The Instituto Gramsci in Rome on May 23, 1964 at a conference on “Ethics and Society” under the auspices of the Italian Communist Party. My sources for this text are Jeanson, 1966: 137-138, the extract “Détermination et liberté” in Contat and Rybalka, 1970: 735-745, Stone and Bowman, 1986 and Anderson, 1993: ch. 7.

<sup>91</sup> My sources for this text are Sartre, 2005 and Stone and Bowman, 1991.

transformation of Sartre's earlier thought into a more dialectical and materialist account of issues such as the question of the possibility of a socialist morality and the role of the intellectual. In these texts Sartre attempts, while using the conceptual arsenal of the *Critique*, to link ethics with doing, a very significant passage from the conception of 'freedom' to the new thoroughly dialectical concept of *praxis*. This transition allows Sartre to ground ethics in the materiality of the world, as this is evidenced by the concept of 'need' first elaborated in the *Critique*. Sartre argues that need is the ultimate foundation of ethics because need represents a lack whose object can only be retrieved in the future, a positive future which is what all praxis inherently points to. Everything that we do regardless of the counterfinality introduced by history aims at the fulfilment of a felt need. Therefore it inherently posits the self-realization of man as a norm. This linking of ethics and need allows Sartre to develop a more materialist account of ethics than the ones he had attempted in his earlier work. For Sartre in the mid-sixties ethics is not so much a structure of values of the being-for-itself as an axiological structure inherent in the most basic of human acts. The mere fact of doing something is, by virtue of its intention to transform the material world in order to fulfil a need, an ethical act as it bears within it the promise of future plenitude and of universal satisfaction. What is more, it is ethical because it posits humanity as a yet unrealized but potentially realizable project. It is very unfortunate that this second attempt to elaborate an ethical theory was also left unfinished and therefore we are left with a series of arguments but not an overall comprehensive theory.

#### THE FAMILY IDIOT: HISTORY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN A DIALECTICAL SYNTHESIS

The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was the last major philosophical work of Sartre. In the years that followed Sartre would write occasional pieces, give innumerable interviews, and generally lend his genius to a great number of progressive political causes around the world. His only major work which would occupy him for the rest of his life and which like the

*Critique* remained unfinished would be *The Family Idiot*, his monumental study of Gustave Flaubert. This work, based almost entirely on the theoretical work undertaken in the *Critique*, attempted to examine Flaubert's life and work within the framework of a very specific interpretive methodology. According to it the individual (the author under scrutiny), his body of work and history would be shown to constitute a multilayered structure whose every level (the personal, the historical, and their mutual objectification which was the work itself) found its ultimate signification in its particular relation to and co-articulation with the other levels. This task, which in the hands of Sartre becomes a real *tour de force* of critical writing, is carried out on three levels. Firstly, there is the attentive examination of the personal, subjective level: Flaubert, as a child born into a petit-bourgeois family, interiorizes the particular quality of his own family life, the aspirations of his parents, his problematic relation with his older brother, his inability to comply successfully with the demands imposed on him, his neurotic escape from his responsibilities as a future bourgeois man. Secondly, there is the examination of the historical level: France during the greatest part of the nineteenth century, the rise of capitalism, the ever changing political situations during the Second Empire, the pauperization of the new industrial proletariat, the crucial, contradictory role of the petite-bourgeoisie during these years. Finally, there is the level of the literary works themselves: each articulating the felt reality of Flaubert, each in its own way a means of transcending his situation towards something else, each providing an instance of the process of history and its subjective interiorization by Flaubert himself.

These levels are processed, as it were, in Sartre's analysis with the use of the progressive-regressive method. According to this method the critic passes from the general analysis of history (the progressive stage) to the concrete situation of the individual (the regressive stage). In other words, through this back and forth movement he attempts to establish both: a) the determining function of macro-phenomena such as the mode of production, the political history and the socio-economic stratification. and b) the irreducible specificity of



micro-phenomena, such as the psychology of the individual, his choices and consequent actions, in other words his project. This last notion is crucial to the problematic of *The Family Idiot*. According to Sartre it is the project that best encapsulates the dialectical relation of subjectivity and objectivity, the one thing that allows us to identify the essential unity and also the tension between the exteriority of the world and the interiority of the individual life. In the *Search for a Method* Sartre defines the project

as the subjective surpassing of objectivity toward objectivity, and stretched between the objective conditions of the environment and the objective structures of the field of possibles, represents in itself the moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity, those cardinal determinants of activity. (Sartre, 1968: 97)

The subjective appears then “as a necessary moment in the objective process” (ibid, 97) and consequently the material conditions which govern human relations in order “to become real conditions of *praxis*, they must be lived in the particularity of particular relations” (ibid, 97). Thus, Flaubert’s genius was the product of the determining forces of his time. Flaubert the man was able to become Flaubert the great writer, because he found himself in certain historically conditioned situations which he in turn attempted to transcend, avoid or come to terms with in his own particular manner, a manner which owes as much to him as to the vast field of history surrounding him.

Everything in *The Family Idiot* revolves around Sartre’s attempt to elucidate the movement of history through the individual interiorization of it and the subsequent re-exteriorization of the transformed subjectivity in the form of *praxis*. Through his projects man, in our case Flaubert, moves outward towards history which he, in turn, partly produces through his acts and his works. Consequently these acts, as part of the objective field of history, partly determine him and others in a continuous process of transformation of all the sides involved in this process. However, it must be noted that Sartre does not want to imply that either side

can exist independently of each other. The project that effectively binds both of them together had already been defined, in the *Search for a Method*, as man's "peculiar structure" and also his "immediate relation with the Other than oneself, beyond the given and constituted elements, this perpetual production of oneself by work and *praxis*" (ibid, 150-151). Our existence then is "neither a will nor a need nor a passion" yet all these elements participate in the structure we call man's existence, one which is not "a stable substance which rests in itself, but rather a perpetual disequilibrium, a wrenching away from itself with all its body" (ibid, 151). This wrenching away is towards history and in it this flight from oneself acquires its significance. In writing *Madame Bovary* Flaubert attempts to present in fictional form a totalisation that he was unable to attain in his real life. His project involves him in a process whereby he must try to substitute idealized beauty (the density of being, according to Sartre) for a life embarrassingly devoid of such beauty. Transcending his petit-bourgeois origins in an imaginary form Flaubert nevertheless preserves it in this work by means of his particular style thus producing something that objectively is a testimony of both his individual reaction to his situation and to the situation itself. It is by inscribing Flaubert's subjectivity that *Madame Bovary* becomes an index of an entire historical period.

What is striking about *The Family Idiot* is that the references to Flaubert's choices during his transition from childhood to adolescence and finally to adulthood are always related to his immediate surrounding (his family) and his own way of living this relation (Flaubert's neuroses). Flaubert's moral and aesthetic choices are examined in the light of this set of relations with his familial and social background and come to give shape to Flaubert's essential aim which was to invent literature as a way out of the most obviously negative aspects of his life. This examination of the moral aspects of Flaubert's life in relation to his life-project effectively negate the metaphysical quality of traditional moral criticism by identifying the ethical as a moment of the larger totalisation that is the project itself; and since the project is the mediating link between subjectivity and history the ethical is further

transformed up to the point where it virtually vanishes. What is left is the movement of history through the mediating presence of the family and the individual's strategies in coping with the exigencies of that movement. Sartre clearly wishes to apply a hermeneutics that will eventually allow the individual to acquire significance as a historical agent, thus appearing through his project(s) as both constituting and constituted. The gap that separates ontology and ethics is still wide only this time the ontology is social, and history as the ultimate totalisation of everything man thinks or makes is there to transform moral choices into specifically individual strategies for negotiating an alienated existence in an alienated world. In Flaubert's case, his morality is an invention, a neurosis, a constitutive element of an alienated existence of a petit-bourgeois individual during the Second Empire. This neurosis, which is his personal reaction to a broader historical situation, corresponds with another objective neurosis which in Sartre's analysis is the ideology of the art for art's sake dogma and which is objective because it forms part of the culture of the period, or in Sartre's terminology, of the practico-inert, that is of culture as inert materiality, as structure.

Let me consider more closely the way Sartre treats Flaubert's transition from a neurotic young man, hateful of his imposed fate (a career in law), spiteful of his over-achieving older brother Achille, suffering from the lack of love from both his parents (an unloving mother and a father who was simply not interested) to a writer committed to present the inherent unworthiness of man, the futility of both love and political change (two deeply engaging projects), the absolute validity of evil as our shared destiny. Flaubert conceives art as his refuge from a woefully imperfect world, chooses a pessimistic and misanthropic attitude towards his society, ignores the possibilities inherent in his own time only to insist on the inevitability of a succession of petty acts and unfulfilled intentions and finally, through his work, serves the function of a grand demoralizer. Sartre traces Flaubert's movement through history – from his unfortunate beginnings in the hostile environment of his family to his eventual recognition by a bourgeois public that Flaubert himself despised – in a manner that

consistently avoids facile moral categorizations, trying instead to elucidate the *raison-d'être* of each of Flaubert's acts, choices, or psychological transformations through a dialectical interposing of personal biography and social and political history. The Flaubert that emerges is still an individual, ultimately irreducible to anything else but himself, but in such a relation to history (often unacknowledged or unconscious) so as to become a singular-universal, that is a man, essentially the same as all the other men with whom he shares his humanity but also a specific man, with a specific history, and a specific fate, different from any other, in the global history that ultimately provides the significance proper to his existence. Flaubert, the self-elect Knight of Nothingness as Sartre dubs him, becomes an (im)moral agent in his will to confront and ultimately sublimate to the point of non-existence both his failed individual history and, more crucially, the historical failures of his era: the failure of 1848, the eventual solidification of bourgeois hegemony, the increasingly troubling contradictions in a society torn between bourgeois oppression and the organized reaction of the working class. Flaubert's entirely negative morality is then presented not as emanating from a distorted soul, seduced by sin and evil but rather as an agonising attempt to secure a notional space of resolution in the imaginary field of art far removed from the bourgeois stupidity that he abhorred. It is ironic then that Flaubert, himself a well-off petit-bourgeois, internalizes this stupidity at the very moment he renounces it most vigorously, thus exhibiting in his literary practice *qua* social practice the hypocrisy and cynicism that he identified as the cardinal sins of his own class. Flaubert, as presented by Sartre, is not the kind of subject one would see emerging in the first case studies of Freud; nor is he a moral agent in the tradition of Aristotelian or post-Aristotelian moral philosophy. He is at once himself and other-than-himself, immersed in history and always in the process of transcending history. Therefore his morality is one of the possible modalities of his existence in the world. Through both his immersion in history and his project's totalising force this morality becomes, in Sartre's narrative, an alienated politics in the form of refused participation in history, of willed

demoralisation and more importantly, from an aesthetic, as well as moral point of view, it is exemplified in Flaubert's conception of art as a privileged space of (moral) negativity and (political) passivity. Finally the ethical moment is shown to be an instance of negotiating the abrupt and unexpected incursion of historicity into the existential subjectively totalised space we call an individual life.

*The Family Idiot* is particularly important for my discussion here because it shows the extent to which Sartre came to acknowledge the ideological and social constraints that curtail the freedom of the individual in any given historical period. Whereas in the thirties and the forties Sartre would subscribe to an abstract, rather formal notion of freedom, by the sixties he would recognize that individual freedom only makes sense (for a radical thinker) if it is conceived as freedom within a given, pre-determined framework. Thus he would be able to say, during the time that he was writing *The Family Idiot* that the limit he would accord to freedom was "the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him." (Sartre, 1972: 35). It is this realization that is made evident in his work on Flaubert. His subject is mobilized not by freedom as conceived by the early Sartre but by need, the new regulatory concept that Sartre announced in the *Critique* and his 'second ethics'. Need, as a concept, allows Sartre to relate Flaubert with his physical and historical environment in such a way as to imply a conditioning, mainly through the family, that thoroughly determines Flaubert's ostensibly 'free' choices. As David A. Jopling has argued, in *The Family Idiot* it is clear that Sartre conceives self-determination "not as a function of a choice that is ultimately underived (...) as if we are possessed of the power to sculpt ourselves from the ground up" but as "a function of reworking and integrating an already sculpted material." (Jopling, 1992: 129). This acknowledgement of the pre-conditioning of the individual and therefore the tacit rejection of an absolute freedom is, along with the specific dialectic of history and

subjectivity, one of the reasons why *The Family Idiot* is so crucial to our understanding of Sartre's thought on ethics and morality.

#### FREEDOM AS BOTH PERSONAL AND POLITICAL PROJECT: AN APPRAISAL OF SARTRE'S CRITICAL THOUGHT

In order to identify and consequently discuss Sartre's critical oeuvre from the viewpoint of its relation with ethics and literature one must firstly identify the basic, foundational concepts of his critical practice. From what I have said so far, it becomes evident that the basic concept of Sartre's entire critical practice is 'freedom'. Freedom is a rather vague term meaning so many things to so many people, therefore, it is appropriate to start by identifying what precisely is the nature of such a term in Sartre's conceptual frame. Conventional concepts of freedom usually fall under two categories: positive and negative freedom. Positive freedom is the elimination of obstacles that hinder man's action whereas negative freedom is expressed in man's right to refuse to suffer the consequences of the exercise of the freedom of other men. This binary conception of freedom is typical of liberal thought and to a large extent it colours the ordinary conception of freedom as well. Sartre's notion of freedom is quite different; firstly it is not so much concerned with man's actions as it is with man's ontological status, and secondly, being ontological rather than practical, it determines man's every consequent thought or act in the most profound manner. According to the liberal tradition of thought man should be considered free as a social monad in his interaction with other equally free social monads. This has been the dominant way of conceiving man's freedom in relation to other men from the time when the bourgeoisie was a rising political force to the present day. It mattered little whether that freedom was made possible because of God or, conversely, postulated on his non-existence. What really mattered was that freedom was conceived externally to the individual or, to put it another way, the ontological status of the individual had absolute primacy over his consequent, and

largely contingent, status of being free or not. In Sartre, such a conception of freedom is shown to be wrong and misguided. According to him freedom is the very structure of man not one of the possibilities of his actual existence. It is the foundation of his being but, it must be emphasised, under a certain condition which effectively distinguishes it from any other form of freedom. Man is born, according to Sartre, in a world without God and therefore a world in which nothing is determined a priori. Consequently, man finds himself literally thrown away in the world without any external support for his deep-rooted (ontologically determined) insecurity and vulnerability. Freedom is precisely the internal structure of this accident that, according Sartre, is man's existence in a world devoid of (a metaphysically secured) meaning. This conception of freedom which characterises Sartre's early work is fundamental to our understanding of his early 'existential' ethics. With God absent man is facing the challenge to provide meaning to his own life by his own acts. Since, in Sartre's view, no factor has a determining force strong enough to effectively neutralize man's freedom he effectively has no other choice than to assume full responsibility for his actions. The ethics that resulted from such a view of the human situation was bound to be an ethics primarily concerned not with the specifics of human life but with its very possibility: radical freedom as foundation of any human act. Such an ethics was not so much concerned with the precise nature of interaction with others, since this was perceived as rather alien and potentially dangerous, as with the self itself. In other words, it was to be an individualist ethics whose single imperative was for man to act in full awareness of his precarious nature of his being-in-the-world, and at the same time it was an ethics that demanded from man to resist the bad faith that results from the negation of his own responsibility for his actions, as these are founded on his own freedom and on that freedom alone. This radical elaboration of the human situation is at the core of Sartre's early philosophy, casting its shadow even on his later dialectical works inspired by his encounter with Marxism.

If his early period was marked by an ambivalent position in as far as morality and politics were concerned this was largely due to the peculiar social position of Sartre. Born into a middle-class family Sartre would be up until the break of World War II a more or less typically educated petit-bourgeois, literate, sensitive to the world but not too eager to commit or unduly expose himself.<sup>92</sup> After his experience during the war, his capture by the Nazis and his eventual realization of the grim facts regarding the Occupation he came to rethink radically his previous social and political stance. This sudden eruption of history into Sartre's life is, among other things, one of the major influences on his early philosophy. Yet, if history, by proving to be inescapable and all-pervading, marked Sartre's thought so did his class-position. As a lower middle-class intellectual Sartre in many ways epitomized the ideological ambiguities of this polymorphous, inherently ambivalent social formation that is the petite-bourgeoisie. Situated between classes in fierce antagonism, it is, by virtue of its relationship with each one of these classes, in a highly fluctuating state. Close to the interests of the working class and at the same time complicit with the established social order which guarantees its survival the most gifted members of this class typify and indeed in some way embody the contradictions of liberal ideology. Sartre, for a long time, was caught in this tension between an opening-up to the real world of insufferable injustice and a profound hesitation to elaborate a truly radical philosophy. It is for this reason that his early philosophy bears the traces of an idealism equally inspired by both his class-origin and, in direct relation with that, by his philosophical lineage. This idealism determines all his early work and is exemplified in the typically Sartrean concept of 'radical freedom'. One of the more consistent accusations directed against *Being and Nothingness* after its publication was that Sartre hypostasized his own class outlook of life and turned it into an ontology thereby effectively neutralizing his own radical intentions. As Herbert Marcuse remarked in 1948

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<sup>92</sup> As he himself admits in his 1975 interview to Michel Contat where he says that "before the war I thought of myself simply as an individual. I was not aware of any ties between my individual existence and the society I was living in". (Sartre, 1978: 45).



In the concrete historical reality, the freedom of the “Pour-soi” (...) is thus nothing but one of the preconditions for the possibility of freedom – it is not freedom itself. Moreover isolated from the specific historical context in which alone the “transcendence” of the subject may become a precondition of freedom, and hypostatized into the ontological form of the subject as such, this transcendental liberty becomes the very token of enslavement. (Marcuse, 1948: 330-331).

Indeed one could say that what Sartre effectively hypostasized was not only his class outlook or the transcendence of the subject but something more vital, namely the reified relations of production of the capitalist world within which the Sartrean subject experiences his alienated and alienating freedom. Authenticity thus became the refusal to be duped by a world devoid of any agreed upon values or conception of a *telos* of human life. Conversely, bad faith was considered to be the naïve and self-destructive, from an existential point of view, faith in the identity of one’s own life with the social functions in which this life manifests itself. This fallacious reasoning led Sartre into believing that he was dealing with an ontological question whereas he was in fact dealing with something that makes sense, at least from a socialist point of view, when viewed and discussed as a symptom of the gradual decay of the moral and existential content of human relations in the long history of capitalism. It would not be long before Sartre would move in that direction and consequently attempt to radically rethink the whole issue of individual freedom.

In the forties Sartre committed himself to achieving a reconciliation of his existential ontology and his socialist aspirations, and thus to reformulating his earlier theory in terms of a more acute awareness of the objective conditions that severely limit human freedom. This was evident in all the works of this period and especially in *What is Literature?*. Yet, traces of idealism were still present. Subjectivity as the starting point of philosophical inquiry, freedom as the ontological structure of man, all these premises created a tension between Sartre’s

theory and his politics. One instance of this tension was made apparent in his treatment of the role of the writer and by extension of literature in general. Although Sartre was careful to present the writer as a historically situated, politically engaged individual, the problem was essentially in the way he perceived the social and political role of the writer in the context of France in the late forties. The contemporary writer might differ from his predecessors in that his vocation was now the demonstration of the necessity of the kingdom of ends in which human freedom would really flourish yet he still remained the self-elected agent who was somehow destined to make profound truths about human life public. It was he who had both the right and the capacity to disclose the truth, which in Sartre's case, was the kind of truth that would eventually lead to a socialist revolution. Sartre's intentions were beyond reproach but his conception of the privileged role of the writer as the mediator between a fundamental truth – literature being in essence “the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution” (Sartre, 1988: 139) – and the reading public was too close to an idealistic conception of literature. It seems that his views on the relative unsuitability of the PCF for a truly radical politics, on the one hand, and his faith in the relative superiority of literature compared with other artistic (or political) means on the other imply what Sartre himself never explicitly said as such, namely that in situations of political urgency and in the absence of a viable political force literature can substitute politics as the only means of promoting the idea of a more just society. Sartre was still caught in a contradictory situation where his politics seemed to be connected with his philosophy in a somewhat forced and occasionally artificial manner. One reason for that, among others, was his early rejection of the materialist problematic of history and his refusal to acknowledge the overdetermined situation of the individual and more specifically of the writer in contemporary capitalist society. Sartre's insistence in substituting the ontological (extra- or ahistorical) level for the political (historical) one made him treat the problems that he addressed in a manner that ultimately left little space for a truly effective political intervention. His almost voluntaristic theory of

literary commitment was directly correlated with the unbridgeable gap between his ontologically conceived individual freedom and a concrete historical situation where the promise of this freedom was little more than hollow rhetoric. Yet Sartre constantly attempted to bridge this gap not by renouncing the idealist premises of his philosophy but by implicitly positing an ethics; in other words by utilising the only resources that his idealist philosophical premises allowed for. This ethics was constantly pointing towards a socialist future but there still remained an unresolved problem: how could an ethical attitude promote a large-scale, radical political change when traditionally it was this very attitude that had come to either implicitly or explicitly legitimize the oppressive order of things whose radical transformation was in question here? Later on in his life Sartre would come to consider this problem as one of the key issues in his philosophy and, as his later texts testify, he never ceased to question his entire philosophy in search of an ethics truly fit for revolutionary politics. Yet, in the late forties the time had not yet come for such a re-appraisal. Among his numerous texts of that period one particularly evocative footnote in *Saint Genet* succeeds in articulating the problem of ethics in a way that I believe most faithfully captures both the intensity and the ambivalence of his engagement with it.

Either morality is stuff-and-nonsense or it is a concrete totality which achieves a synthesis of Good and Evil. For Good without Evil is Parmenidean Being, that is, Death, and Evil without Good is pure Nonbeing. To this objective synthesis there corresponds, as a subjective synthesis, the recovery of negative freedom and its integration into absolute freedom or freedom properly so-called. The reader will understand, I hope, that what is involved here is not a Nietzschean "beyond" Good and Evil, but rather a Hegelian "*Aufhebung*." The abstract separation of these two concepts expresses simply the alienation of man. The fact remains that, in the historical situation, this synthesis cannot be achieved. Thus, any Ethic which does not explicitly profess that it is *impossible today* contributes to the bamboozling and alienation of men. The ethical "problem" arises from the fact that Ethics is *for us* inevitable and at the same time impossible. (Sartre, 1963, 168n).

It is certainly tempting to consider the last two sentences of this passage as the most appropriate description of Sartre's long struggle with the question of morality and there is a very good reason for that as the consequent development of his thought shows.

In the fifties Sartre began to explore the possibilities of a *rapprochement* between his own philosophy and Marxism. This resulted in a deep transformation of his earlier thought as is evidenced in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. One of the most important features of this transformation was that the ethical question gave way to a purely political problematic which was most openly articulated in his polemical writings in the late fifties and the sixties. This political problematic sought to provide the foundation for any knowledge that may effectively lead to a revolutionary transformation of society. The key word here is the word 'revolutionary' and it is therefore logical to assume that the relegation of ethics to a secondary (from a practical-political point of view) status points to Sartre's implicit acceptance of Lenin's dictum that the revolutionary has no ethics, since his aim, and his aim alone, provides all the justification needed. This is not to say that Sartre adopted a purely pragmatic attitude during that period despite the facts that his *The Communists and the Peace* clearly shows that Sartre was not adverse to making decisions solely on the basis of what he perceived as the practical demands of the present situation. It is rather to say that during that period Sartre interiorized, as it were, the fundamental contradiction inherent in all forms of radical socialist thought, namely that ethics and socialist politics make strange bedfellows and yet the latter already presupposes a definite conception of the former. The problem of course is to define what kind of ethics is compatible with such a politics and Sartre was, by the end of that period, ready to tackle this thorny problem but the specifics of such an attempt are beyond the scope of this discussion. For Sartre, in the sixties, literature no longer held a privileged position in the cultural field. Hence all specific questions about its relation with ethics were to be partially answered in texts that dealt with more general and more politically

urgent matters. The tension between the ethical and the political was still evidenced in his writings and interviews but for Sartre the political was by then of paramount importance. But the reasons for the relegation of ethics to an issue of secondary importance are more complex than any consideration of the practical demands imposed on a committed intellectual might allow us to grasp. The reasons are to also found in the philosophical trajectory of Sartre in the fifties and the sixties.

His 'conversion' to Marxism did not only enable him to take more fully into account the materiality of history, but also imposed on him certain limits as to what counts as effective intervention in the intellectual field. The notoriously problematical relation of Marxism and ethics has been to a large extent interiorized by Sartre and thus came to constitute an internal limit in his philosophical elaboration of ethics. Ethics in its widely accepted and still very traditional forms requires a theory of the individual and it is true that within the framework of Marxist thought at the time such a theory was still underdeveloped. Furthermore, when it did present itself in a more or less elaborated form it was to a large extent a modified version of traditional liberal humanism.<sup>93</sup> Sartre was most intensely experiencing this tension between the political imperative of Marxism and the ethical imperative implicit in his own thought. Opting for the former resulted in a period of intense theoretical and political activity where the ethical component in his thought came to constitute the absent centre of his whole theoretical and political project. In the late seventies when due to illness and old age Sartre was forced to remain away from the active politics of his earlier years the question of ethics came once more to the fore. Yet this re-affirmation of the importance of the elaboration of a moral problematic regarding history, politics and individual consciousness was only partially due to the practical constraints imposed on his life. There is some evidence, however controversial it may be, that Sartre underwent a second 'conversion' this time leading him

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<sup>93</sup> Louis Althusser's "Marxism and Humanism" in *For Marx*, (Verso, 1982), pp. 221-247 offers a very interesting as well as controversial discussion of the place of humanist conceptions of subjectivity within the framework of Marxism.

back to his pre-Marxist, early humanist premises. I am of course referring to Sartre's attempt to found a new ethics of solidarity and reciprocity not based on the 'I' of the Cartesian tradition but on the 'We' of the community of human beings who recognize one another on the basis of their shared and inalienable humanity. I shall not go into the specifics of this project – itself a collaboration between Sartre and Benny Lévy – as what is left from it is only a series of much contested interviews<sup>94</sup> which at best offer only a possible direction of thought and not anything more substantial. What I wish to emphasize is the importance of Sartre's engagement with Marxism to the understanding of the ambiguous status of the question of ethics in his thought and work during almost two decades. As soon as practical as well as ideological changes took place the ethical problematic resurfaced again, although in a form hardly compatible with Sartre's own previous development.

Sartre's importance as a moral thinker is huge and despite the rather hostile reception of his work by poststructuralism (a reception which arguably shows more than a hint of an 'anxiety of influence') his work is still capable of provoking questions and leading to unexpected directions. This, I believe, is due to the fact that Sartre never chose to evade or suppress the questions that history posed in the vain hope of articulating a purely formal philosophy. Instead he encountered history and the political problems that were posed in its course with the intention of articulating a theory that would do justice to both the lived experience of the individual and to the objective conditions of his existence. I believe that in order to properly assess his present relevance it matters little if Sartre's thought is considered to be as nothing more than a radical version of petit-bourgeois oppositionism, although I would concede that there are textual and biographical evidence that support this view. The same holds for the questions regarding his thought's compatibility with Marxism of any

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<sup>94</sup> Published in English as "The Last Words of Jean-Paul Sartre" in *Dissent*, 27 (Fall 1980), 397-422. Although they represent an intriguing testimony of Sartre's late thought they are treated with scepticism by a number of Sartrean scholars.

variety. That which, in my opinion, distinguishes his entire work was his ability to pose certain crucial questions, to foreground specific issues and themes and finally to be always willing to engage in self-criticism and revise or reject his previous work whenever he thought it necessary. By that I do not wish to lay any particular emphasis on the intellectual integrity of Sartre the intellectual as this is not my subject here. Instead I wish to point out that the value of his work lies in the fact that in it we witness the *mise en relief* of all the problems that a radical middle-class intellectual is inevitably about to face provided that he steadfastly refuses to resort to a mystificatory idealism which practically effaces history and struggle and only solves problems by abstracting them from their real conditions of existence.

Regarding the specific question of ethics and literature his importance lies not only in his texts in the forties and the early fifties but in the whole trajectory of his thought. What is more important than his polemical essays in *What is Literature?* and his existential biographies is his gradual realization of the extreme difficulty a radical leftist intellectual faces when he tries to reconcile the often contradictory demands of politics and ethics. When Sartre virtually abandoned literature he did so believing that its efficacy as a weapon in the struggle of human emancipation has long been overestimated and that it was time for a more practical intervention. There is always the possibility that this may be construed as itself implying a latent idealism, the exclusive focus on the political even at the risk of ignoring the dialectical determinations that condition the movement of all levels (political, economic, ideological). Yet, his disappointment with the actual role of literature in a capitalist society also marks a transition from his earlier subjectivist-rationalist view to a more nuanced objectivist view of the literary phenomenon. A key to the understanding of his attitude during the later part of his life is his philosophy of the *Critique*. No matter how noble or politically progressive are the intentions of the writer his work, as part of the totalisations effected by all other agents who are engaged with it either directly or indirectly, is caught in the web of counter-finality, which is an aim that the work itself did not initially codify in its

form and content. Thus, objectively, even the most politically progressive works risk being effectively neutralized simply by being parts of infinitely larger (cultural, ideological, and political) networks. This realization has far-reaching consequences for the intellectual and Sartre himself chose to devote his energies to practical political causes believing that radical politics was better served by practical action than by cultural interventions. But his long engagement with Flaubert shows another dimension of his later thought, namely that the middle-class intellectual can only contribute to a radical politics through the only means available to him even at the risk of political irrelevance. At the end Sartre's whole itinerary shows that the writer/intellectual ought to recognize the objective limits of his actions, while still trying to offer the best he can for the cause that he has aligned himself with. This contradiction animates his last major project, *The Family Idiot* and makes it such a unique work of criticism.

It is very difficult to identify something like an essence in Sartre's entire oeuvre, although, as I have already said, freedom is admittedly the concept that is central in all his thought. What I think is even more important, from the point of view adopted here, is his early view of literature as a liberating force in the struggle for radical human emancipation. I do not wish for a moment to underestimate the importance of Sartre's philosophy, but what I think makes his work distinctive is his eagerness to transcend his own condition in view of a goal far greater than his own individual projects. It is this generous opening up to history with a political aim that justifies such a move that makes Sartre's work strike a chord with anyone not utterly complacent with the function of art in our societies. Statements like the following<sup>95</sup> may betray an idealistic enthusiasm but they still convey a sense of urgency that is still much needed today.

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<sup>95</sup> From the "The Purpose of Writing" an interview given to Madeleine Chapsal in 1959 and published in her volume entitled *Les Écrivains en personne*.



If literature is not everything, it is worth nothing. This is what I mean by 'commitment'. It wilts if it is reduced to innocence or to songs. If a written sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society, then it makes no sense. What is the literature of an epoch but the epoch appropriated by its literature? (Sartre, 1974: 13-14).

It is this urgency coupled with an unfailing sense of justice that made Sartre say in the same interview from which the previous extract is taken something that sums up his own engagement and his continued relevance today: “(...) writers can *no longer* describe. They must take sides” (ibid, 26).

## LITERATURE AND THE MORAL VALUE OF LIBERALISM:

### THE CRITICISM OF LIONEL TRILLING

... it is upon the degree and quality of moral intensity  
that all aesthetic considerations of the novel depend.

*A Gathering of Fugitives*

Lionel Trilling was undoubtedly one of the major American literary critics of the twentieth century, renowned not only for his critical work but also for his wide-ranging influence in the humanities in post-war America. His critical authority established itself with the publication of the *Liberal Imagination*, a collection of critical essays that dealt with issues beyond the rather narrow confines of a traditionally conceived literary criticism. This was indeed what enabled Trilling to gradually acquire the unofficial status of the spokesman of a whole generation of liberal intellectuals who, shortly after the end of Second World War, were searching for a new articulation of liberalism, at a safe distance from both the – discredited – radicalism of the thirties and the emerging political and cultural conservatism of that era. Trilling's qualities, his peculiar elusive style, his emphatically undogmatic thought, his grasp of the essential qualities and modulations of the *Zeitgeist*, all these made his work the ideal vehicle of the transformative cultural process which consisted in restoring the validity and 'dignity' of liberal ideas in an era haunted by the memory of concentration camps and the prospect of global nuclear war. Trilling's achievement is that he managed to articulate the tensions of this process in a manner that was both historically pertinent at least to its assumed target audience and also far-reaching in its effects. His work is marked by the rare distinction of being read and discussed by people not only outside the narrow circle of academics in English or American literature departments, but also outside the academic world in general, a feature that partly accounts for the centrality of his work in the wider

context of the ideological transformations that took place in America from the thirties to the seventies. However, another feature of his thought is of greater importance to me here. Trilling's critical work is one of the most potent and persuasive explorations of the connection between ethics and literature, between the social, and by extension ethical and political context of literature, and the literary quality of individual works or authors. This is what marks his criticism more than anything else and this is what I intend to concentrate on in the discussion that follows.

#### LITERATURE AND MORAL VALUES: REFORMULATING MIDDLE-CLASS LIBERALISM

Trilling started his career in the early twenties, first writing for the Jewish journal *The Menorah Journal*, and later for the *Partisan Review*. The latter was a journal mainly identified with the group of intellectuals that later became known as the New York Intellectuals. It is this relatively tight and culturally homogeneous group that was to be Trilling's extended family. Within this community of like-minded peers, mostly secular Jews with a strong sense of the connection between the cultural and the political, Trilling began elaborating his own critical ideas, his main themes – politics and culture – and his strong sense of the (almost messianic) mission of the intellectual amidst a world almost completely devoid of (real) meaning and without any (real) sense of purpose. The world Trilling was experiencing first hand could find both meaning and a sense of purpose, but apparently not the kind that an intellectual like him could possibly endorse. The word 'world' might lead one to think that a reference is made to the wider imaginable collectivity but, in Trilling's case, it is simply referring to the American middle class.<sup>96</sup> This class – one could easily contend – was the only audience Trilling ever addressed and the only class that had, as far as he was concerned, the capability of re-educating itself so as to fulfil its social and political functions in a way that

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<sup>96</sup> Delmore Schwartz has made the definitive statement about Trilling's relation with the American middle class. According to Schwartz "Mr. Trilling is interested in the ideas and attitudes and interests of the educated class, such as it is and such as it may become: it is of this class that he is, at heart, the guardian and the critic." (Schwartz, 1970: 212).

would do justice to its main founding ideals: individual freedom, justice, imaginative curiosity, tolerance, open-mindedness and magnanimity. To the interests of this class and the ideological formations that sustained its existence Trilling devoted the bulk of his intellectual energy and talent.

When Trilling began his career the liberal intelligentsia was, or so it seemed, in an agonizing close contact with Marxist ideas and a political radicalism that demanded solutions to actual problems with a sense of urgency that a mind like Trilling's could only regard as too close to fanaticism and intellectual and moral retrogression. His own *rapprochement* with Marxism<sup>97</sup> in the thirties only served to imprint in his consciousness the dangers that a well-meaning liberal runs into when his sense of justice is allowed to be contaminated by dogmas, directives, inflexible situations and an overpowering sense of (self-)righteousness and uninhibited militancy. With the end of World War II and the moral (if not yet political) bankruptcy of the Stalinist model Trilling set himself the task of addressing the new situation of post-war America which was entering an era of economic growth and political stability. These two factors made some Americans believe that the passions of the turbulent past decades could no longer pose any serious threat to the new situation. Yet unlike those who were content with self-congratulatory accounts of the new status of America as a new empire, asserting its dominance not only in the economic sphere but also in the cultural one, Trilling set himself the task of interrogating the liberal ideal so as to enable it to distance itself even more radically from the left-wing ideological and political excesses of the past, and to make full use of its rich cultural resources in order to lead the way for a more enlightened future. Trilling of course was doing more than that even if he never explicitly acknowledged as much. In fact, he was also trying to establish a new status for the intellectual in post-war

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<sup>97</sup> It must be noted that Trilling's relation to Marxist politics was both short-lived and according to all his biographers certainly half-hearted. In the early thirties Trilling followed many of his radical colleagues in the *Menorah Journal* to the NCDPP (National Committee for the Defence of Political Prisoners) an organization set up by the Communist Party. More information can be found in Krupnick, 1986, pp. 35-46 and in Trilling's "Whitaker Chamber's Journey" published in 1975 in the *Times Saturday Review* and reprinted in *The Last Decade*.

America, the intellectual not only as scholar, educator or even prophet, but above all the intellectual as someone who has the ability to influence or even change things by his use of ideas. In short the intellectual as man of power. In this, as in many other respects, Trilling is indeed, as he has been often described<sup>98</sup>, the intellectual most closely related to Matthew Arnold in terms of the specific social and political inflection of his writings and more crucially in terms of his whole cultural/educational program of substituting literature for other metaphysical or secular religions that are deemed ideologically exhausted or historically ineffective. Trilling, working closely within this Arnoldean paradigm, set out to probe the inner centre of the liberal world-view, to identify its weaknesses, its failings, its ideological mystifications and above all its perpetual tendency towards moral ambiguity. It is this moral ambiguity that puzzles him above all: the liberal inability not to allow itself to be seduced by forms of belief that endanger its very purity and eventually even its own existence.

Trilling thus attempts to articulate a new ideological space where this liberal world-view could express and assert itself without fear of violating its own most incontestable founding ideals. In this attempt he uses literature as the privileged point of departure from which one can survey the whole of the human situation in all its variousness and complexity. He also uses literature for its social and political relevance, its own unbreakable ties with the actual world of human beings, its rootedness in history and ultimately its moral significance. This is precisely what animates Trilling's own project and sets it apart from either New Criticism or the projects of other more politically-oriented critics. Trilling's view and perception of literature is one dominated by the moral power of the written word, its ability not only to identify the place where morality comes into being but also to influence people in their own moral choices. It is this imprint that the ethical leaves in the literary work that is Trilling's main point of reference throughout his long career. Through that he attempts to re-read many of the canonical works of English and American literature in a way that foregrounds

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<sup>98</sup> See for instance Chase, 1980 & Krupnick, 1986.

their status as great inventories of moral virtues and unsurpassable examples of great moral vision; in other words repositories of cultural values that the keen and well-guided reader could find and make full use of.

#### FIRST ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING THE LIBERAL SPIRIT

From what I have said so far it seems fitting that Trilling's first published book (1939) was a biography of Matthew Arnold. This choice was not without its significance. In the thirties, Trilling was actively searching for an alternative to what he considered as mere pieties of the middle classes and the ideological mystification that resulted from a purely aesthetic conception of literature on the one hand and a politically committed one on the other. Arnold's work would provide such an alternative for the young Trilling for whom the famous Arnoldean dictum that literature is a criticism of life would become one of his most unshakable beliefs. Arnold's idea of disinterestedness, his appreciation of the moral tension in art, his valuation of the free play of the mind and of the imagination in an era that was more keen on social order and the idea of material progress provided Trilling with a suitable foundation for his highly charged idealistic conception of the connection between literature and society. Arnold's romantic ideas – especially his strong belief in the absolute supremacy of moral and spiritual values over any materially determined ones, whether these appear in the sphere of politics or of society at large – are taken by Trilling as the means for the construction of an ideological space, where one could successfully transcend the contradictory and equally damaging prevalent conceptions of literature and criticism, and where one could establish a new conception that effectively leads out of politics while pretending to be political itself.

Trilling read Arnold and by extension the whole Victorian culture with the intellectual curiosity of someone who was clearly intensely dissatisfied with his own contemporary world. Trilling, who in many ways was himself a twentieth-century Victorian, found in

Arnold the key critical concepts which he would later adapt to his own critical ends. Critical disinterestedness, as was mentioned earlier, was certainly one of these concepts; culture as a regulative ideal another. Yet, what left the greatest impression on Trilling was Arnold's conception of the pedagogical role of the humanist intellectual vis-à-vis his own class and the social and political situation of his day. This would become the ground on which Trilling would later on build his own critical-pedagogical project with *The Liberal Imagination* and his subsequent work.

*Matthew Arnold* is an intellectual biography which shows not only the intellectual, artistic and moral qualities of its subject matter but also the talent and the intellectual distinction of its writer. Yet, being Trilling's first book, in fact a reworking of his PhD thesis, it gives us only a glimpse of the direction that his thought would take in later years. What it does give us is a young intellectual who, in the middle of a turbulent period, filled with highly charged political debates and painful personal decisions, so close to the pro-communist segment of the liberal intelligentsia and yet so far away from it in his mind and heart, chooses to deal with a critic that showed through his work that true intelligence consists in pragmatically accepting the 'conditioned' aspects of life, submitting to them if necessary for the sake of the edification of the classes he has appointed himself to instruct and guide. Trilling's work on Arnold may be read as the chronicle of an intellectual and moral apprenticeship with a master to be matched. Arnold was representative of a certain type of intellectual that Trilling was trying to emulate at a time when most of those around him were either flirting or seriously engaged with the Communist Left. According to him, Arnold's mind was responsive to historical, cultural, and moral complexity, and it was therefore a model for the truly great mind or self. Trilling would subsequently insist that such a mind can and should function within contradictions, never attempting premature resolutions, always allowing for the secondary consideration of the pragmatic imperatives of any given moment. So Arnold would come to represent the embodiment of a critical consciousness that resists formulaic

thought and systematization and thus promotes true intelligence ('imaginative reason' in Arnoldean parlance) and openness of mind, two features that Trilling would later celebrate in the *Liberal Imagination*. Trilling's book on Arnold may then be said to represent for him the perfect foil for his own dissatisfaction with Marxist politics, which Trilling always designated with the term Stalinism<sup>99</sup>, and a timely reminder for him that there is wisdom in sticking with one's own class interests and ideas since ultimately these are the ones one intuitively knows best and considers best as well.

In 1943, Trilling published his second book, a critical study of E. M. Forster. His choice of Forster has its own peculiar significance for the evolution of Trilling's thought on the subjects of literary ethics and liberal ideology. Trilling reads Forster's work as exemplary in two crucial aspects. The first is the attitude of the intellect in its attempt to come to terms with the modern world and the second is the limitations of liberal ideology in dealing with this world. This reading enables Trilling to articulate for the first time the themes of moral realism, of the dangers posed by the human will when left unchecked, of the tragic dimension of life and finally of the inability of modern liberalism to accept this tragic nature of fate and the inextricable mixture of good and evil.

Trilling starts his study with an introductory chapter entitled "Forster and the Liberal Imagination" which would eventually give its name to his most famous book some years later. In this introduction we read that Forster's manner "is the agent of a moral intention which can only be carried out by the mind *ondoyant et divers* of which Montaigne spoke" (Trilling, 1982: 5). In this sentence we find two of the most central themes of Trilling's work: authorial manner as an agent of 'moral intention' and the ideal (liberal) mind which is flexible and open enough so as to accommodate itself to the great moral paradox that is reality. This

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<sup>99</sup> Stalinism, a recurrent term in Trilling's writings, should not be confused with the actual political system of the Soviet Union from the early thirties until the mid-fifties. Although closely related with it Trilling's version of Stalinism was more a kind of *Weltanschauung*, an intellectual mood, even a style of self than something that had anything substantial to do with the world of actual politics. Only in his late years did Trilling explicitly make a distinction between Marxism and Stalinism calling the latter a species of the former (Trilling, 1982: 240).



ideal liberal mind is what makes a novelist produce a body of work that does justice to the moral ambiguities of the actual world. Trilling writes:

All novelists deal with morality, but not all novelists, or even all good novelists, are concerned with moral realism, which is not the awareness of morality itself but of the contradictions, paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life (ibid, 6).

This is what literature, and more specifically good literature, is all about according to Trilling. An inventory of all the possible encounters between moral principles and conditioned lives, between the ideal and the actual, between the imperialistic drive of the human will and reason and the resistance offered by the thick, inherently contradictory substance of actual society. Moral realism, which is the name of such a realization, is for Trilling the yardstick by which all literature is to be examined and evaluated. Yet, this is only a part of Trilling's view on literature and the essentially moral mind that produces it. The other part has to do with the social and political determinants of literature and it is very crucial for any political reading of his work. Further in the introduction and while discussing the shortcomings of the liberal mind when it is faced with the realities of the modern world Trilling writes:

... in *Howard's End* [Forster] shows the conflicting truths of the idea - that on the one hand class is character, soul and destiny, and on the other hand class is not finally determining. He knows that class may be truly represented only by struggle and contradiction, not by description, and preferably by moral struggle in the heart of a single person. (ibid, 11).

In these words Trilling articulates his own increasingly apparent distance from his quasi-radical youth and the mindset of left-wing liberals who kept on insisting that class determines (real or literary) characters far more than he was willing to accept. It is worth noting how

Trilling makes the passage from a still largely dialectical perspective (...represented by struggle and contradiction) to a moral and idealistic one (... moral struggle in the heart of a single person). The key word for this transition is 'preferably', a word resonant with Trilling's wish to advance to a stage where the political (all that is related to class and class struggle) is finally banned from criticism only to survive as a moral discourse *preferably* dealing with the moral trials and tribulations of that mythical entity of liberal bourgeois ideology, the individual, the single person. Yet, there were many liberals who, enraged by the social injustices they saw around them, cared for something more radical and effective than merely acknowledging the moral complexity of the human soul. To those, Trilling, has an answer, not a direct, explicitly stated one, but an answer articulated indirectly through his reading of Forster. Trilling says of him that although he is not satisfied by the way people act "he does not believe there are any new virtues to be discovered" and he adds that "not by becoming better but by ordering and distributing his native goodness can man live as befits him" (ibid, 15). The liberal, driven by his tendency to prematurely adopt radical positions, finds himself and his most sacred principles compromised. He loses his flexibility and openness and ends up endorsing a new barbarism (so Trilling held) that has nothing to do with the original intention of the liberal mind. To counterbalance this tendency, Trilling enlists Forster as a powerful ally, a mind truly sensitive to the dangers of commitment, that shows through his fiction that a conservative attitude towards change (especially political change) can be a wiser alternative to a progressive will ignorant of the most profound truths of the human situation. Forster distrusts reason and Trilling is bound to agree with him. Sovereign Reason, this ambiguous product of modernity, is gradually transformed, in Trilling's mind, into a disease rather than a cure. But, instead of attempting to probe deeper into the (apparent) deficiencies of Reason in the context of contemporary capitalism and the relation of the former to the latter, Trilling chooses to idealistically treat these problems outside any real historical framework thus discussing them as if they were tragic qualities inherent in the human

situation. For all these reasons Trilling reads Forster's work as if it constituted, its shortcomings notwithstanding, an ideal expression.

#### MORAL IMAGINATION AND THE NECESSITY OF LIBERALISM

In 1950 Trilling published a collection of essays under the title *The Liberal Imagination*, a book that proved to be one his most successful and certainly the most influential. These essays, written during the forties, deal with all the major themes of Trilling's work and, particularly, as the title indicates, with the role of the liberal mind in post-war America. The historical context of these essays is the beginning of the Cold War era, the political and ideological retreat of the American Left and the first glimpses of a new global geopolitical force that was to deal with world affairs with an increasingly arrogant and self-serving manner. In the United States, however, other things became slowly apparent. Cold War propaganda did nothing to invigorate the political debates of the previous decades. Conservative thought, as Trilling was quick to see, seemed dry, ideologically unproductive and of no real cultural force. Finally liberals, confused as they were by the contradictory impulses generated by their own ideas, seemed unable to move forward towards the elaboration of new ideas and a new ideological synthesis. As a result they did not allow themselves to go beyond freedom, itself the ultimate fetish of the liberal mind, toward a state of imaginative curiosity and heightened moral realization. Trilling takes it upon himself to provide the foundations for exactly such a transition.

One of the first things that must be noted in relation to this collection of essays is Trilling's style. Trilling is famous, and to some infamous, for his elusive, indirect style, his way of putting on paper his own mind's movements, from a thesis to its antithesis stopping just short of reaching a final synthesis. Trilling's dialectics, which in fact – for reasons that will hopefully become clear in the following discussion – lacks the third term of the Hegelian dialectics, is one that accepts conflicts but has no room for resolutions. It is a pseudo-

dialectics that sees historical and intellectual movement as happening between two mutually exclusive poles without any real prospect of transcendence. In “Reality in America”, the first essay of *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling speaks of certain nineteenth-century writers as “repositories of the dialectic of their culture” because “they contained both the yes and the no of their culture” (Trilling, 1961: 9). Such is also Trilling’s style at least on the surface: a judiciously paced prose that reflects his deeper conviction that moral gravitas exists only where two contradictory ideas are held in a state of perpetual irresolution thus creating a space where tensions, contradictions and paradoxes all contribute to a certain world outlook, more a sense and an intuition than a philosophy or a system. This outlook is of course the liberal one and Trilling tries to textualize, as it were, the specific qualities of an intellect capable of seeing the world that way. In “The Meaning of a Literary Idea”, the last essay of the book, Trilling gives a name to this capability calling it a “negative” one by which he means the “willingness to remain in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts”, something that does not imply, “as one tendency of modern feeling would suppose, an abdication of intellectual activity” (ibid, 299). Later on I shall examine whether such a claim is justified or not.

The *Liberal Imagination* was a groundbreaking event in its time. Much more than merely a collection of literary essays it was an attempt to enlist literature as a major ally in the fight against the ideological confusion of the American liberal middle class. Trilling’s purpose is obliquely codified in “Reality in America” in a phrase that would eventually come to be regarded as the trademark of his critical method. In his discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne, he expresses his admiration for the nineteenth-century writer by characterizing him as someone who “could dissent from the orthodoxies of dissent” (ibid, 9). In the same way, Trilling, dissenting from the orthodoxies of liberal dissent, offers a series of readings of mainly literary works that emphasize the centrality of literary imagination and its status as a corrective to the naïve and occasionally vulgar beliefs of his own audience. He believed that

the liberal mind, affected from its close proximity to left ideas and always in danger of being obliterated by the ever-spreading cynicism of a crassly materialistic society, needed a new set of ideas or, even better, a new faith. As Trilling was a secular critic, religion was out of the question and in true Arnoldean fashion he opted for literature. The result is one of the most impressive attempts to institute literature as the only true and reliable guide for human conduct and, as I shall attempt to argue, the only thing that may protect the human spirit and ultimately human culture from the pernicious effects of actual politics. In one of the most cryptic passages of his book, in the essay “The Function of the Little Magazine”, Trilling writes

our fate, for better or worse, is political. It is therefore not a happy fate, even if it has an heroic sound, but there is no escape from it, and the only possibility of enduring it is to force into our definition of politics every human activity and every subtlety of every human activity. There are manifest dangers in doing this, but greater dangers in not doing it. *Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind that we will not like.* (ibid, 100). (emphasis mine)

Why is it that a politically conscious imagination may prove to be not such a good thing? I believe that the answer to this question sheds light on the main problem, which is Trilling’s relation to history and politics. Trilling is undoubtedly very much conscious of history and the historical situatedness of literature. In the “Sense of the Past” his main argument against the New Critics revolves around precisely such a realization. He states - and few of us now would want to argue with him - that “the literary work is ineluctably a historical fact” and, more importantly, “its historicity is a fact in our aesthetic experience” (ibid, 184). But Trilling is also conscious of another fact which is that “the refinement of our historical sense chiefly means that we keep it properly complicated” (ibid, 188). Not any history but only a properly complicated sense of the past will do. Needless to say this complexity is not so much a

feature of history but a mark of the superiority of the critical mind that sees and appreciates it. This critical mind, aided by his liberal imagination, must make sure that its proper domain, literature and culture, is kept apart from politics. It is this same mind, always to be understood as a collective agent, that must 'read' history and politics in such a way as to make sure that the proper distinctions among the various domains are always respected. But the question I posed before remains unanswered. Why does politics need imagination and mind, and why do the latter become so menacing if allowed to become politics? The answer may be given obliquely through another passage in the "The Function of the Little Magazine". In discussing contemporary literature inspired by liberal ideas Trilling writes:

And if on the other hand we name those writers who, by the general consent of the most serious criticism, by consent too of the very class of educated people of which we speak, are to be thought of as monumental figures of our time, we see that to these writers the liberal ideology has been at least a matter of indifference. Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, Mann (in his creative work), Kafka, Rilke, Gide – all have their own love of justice and the good life, but in not one of them does it take the form of a love of the ideas and emotions which liberal democracy, as known by our educated class, has declared respectable (ibid, 98).

This is the imagination and mind that should not be allowed to be turned into politics. The great modernist minds who launched an unprecedented assault against the basic principles of Western civilisation – traditional humanism being an easy target and one of the most lamented casualties of this cultural offensive – might now inspire, if left unsupervised, a new politics that could potentially destroy the very foundations of liberal society. This politics would be a politics of extremes, left or right, and it is against this ominous possibility that Trilling warns his audience. If American liberals are to avoid a politics of extremes they must learn to appreciate the variousness (*sic*) and complexity of literature and thus make it capable of gradually enriching conventional politics no matter how unintelligent this politics may be.

The main aim is to prevent the worst from happening, a fiercely oppositional culture informing a politics where 'real' interests are at stake. It is hard not to see the conservative implications of such a belief. Unless liberal intellectuals are in a position to exert some considerable influence on all things cultural a sinister politics (Stalinism or Fascism no doubt) will come to the foreground and threaten to destroy the very foundations of liberal America.

Yet, Trilling's problem remained unresolved. Literature could aid political liberalism in becoming more refined and thus adequate for the exigencies of the time, yet most of our great literature is evidently ill-fitted for fulfilling such a function. Could this entail the negation of modernism and thus initiate a search for an alternative that would take its place? In the forties, Trilling would not seriously entertain any such ideas. He would however find solace and some very powerful literary examples in the work of nineteenth-century writers such as Hawthorne and Henry James who would enable him to forcefully articulate his views on literature as moral lesson. In other words, what Trilling cannot find in modernist writing he is bound to find it in the older narrative form, the classic realist novel. What he rediscovers there is the notion of moral realism, arguably one of the most central and politically significant notions in Trilling's work. For him the classic novel is a medium of moral enlightenment more privileged than any other form, literary or extraliterary. In "Manners, Morals, and the Novel", he clearly states his preferences thus: "for our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years"(ibid, 222). He goes on by reminding us that "its greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unrelenting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it." (ibid, 222).

This brings us to the centre of Trilling's conception about ethics and literature. The moral realism that Trilling so much admires is the capacity to acknowledge that every human being and every situation is so overdetermined that no clear cut distinction between good

and evil is possible, or as Trilling would probably add, desirable. This awareness of the essential tragic quality of life is what makes a certain author or a certain work worthy of our admiration since it teaches us to be tolerant, open-minded and more appreciative of the ironies of the human situation. In short, moral realism educates us in the most profound sense of the word. Being the ideal counterpart of the liberal mind, moral realism instructs this mind to value patience or even passivity when it is required and to abstain from making rush judgments. Otherwise, there is always the risk of engaging in activities that may prove far more harmful than originally anticipated. In the forties, when Trilling writes these essays, the object of his criticism is hardly concealed. Left-wing liberals and the literature they value, the socialist novels of Theodore Dreiser and John Steinbeck, the criticism of V. L. Parrington, all these instances of an imagination and sensitivity enthralled, so Trilling believed, by its own self-righteousness are what constitutes his primary target in *The Liberal Imagination*. But Trilling is not content merely to show the shortcomings of the aesthetic and intellectual culture of a large part of the left-leaning liberal middle class. He wishes to offer this class an alternative way of thinking and dealing with the world that would appreciate virtues quite unlike any of those held in esteem among them.

In *The Princess Casamassima*, one of the most powerful essays that Trilling ever published, we are given a reading of James's eponymous novel that focuses on the moral force of the narrative. What Trilling admires in James' novel is the masterful way in which his narrative unfolds, the construction of the main characters and the moral weight each one of them is given by the twists and turns of the narrative itself. At the end of the fifth part of the essay, after Trilling has presented his own reading of the novel's plot and narrative structure, we are given a concise account of his interpretation of the decisive act that marks the fate of Hyacinth, one of the novel's main characters. After discussing how Hyacinth finds himself torn between two contradictory worlds, the world of art and culture and the world of underground revolutionary activity, and after he emphasizes how Hyacinth becomes aware of



the irreconcilability of the principles that he has to adhere to due to his divided loyalties, Trilling concludes:

Hyacinth's death, then, is not his way of escaping from irresolution. It is truly a sacrifice, an act of heroism. He is a hero of civilization because he dares do more than civilization does: embodying two ideals at once, he takes upon himself, in full consciousness, the guilt of each. He acknowledges both his parents. By his death he instructs us in the nature of civilized life and by his consciousness he transcends it (ibid, 86).

It matters little for my discussion here whether this is the most persuasive interpretation of Hyacinth's fate in James's novel. What does matter is the way in which this paragraph codifies all that Trilling believed about the proper role of the liberal imagination in the modern world. It also matters a great deal if we accept, following certain of Trilling's critics<sup>100</sup>, that this paragraph is not so much a literary interpretation of a fictional character but a projection of Trilling's ideal self into his own criticism. What we see here is the glorification of a certain sensitivity which, unable to resolve what in fact is always, according to Trilling, irresolvable, chooses to sacrifice itself instead of taking a position for or against what is presented to it as an alternative. That is why this exquisite mind does "more than civilization does". Instead of moving forward no matter what the consequences Hyacinth takes the tragic paradox of his life to its extreme by negating this very life.

In so doing, Hyacinth becomes for Trilling the poetic symbol of a certain kind of modern liberal intellectual who must "acknowledge both his parents", right and left, good and evil, and must, by virtue of his work, transcend the messy, unpredictable and morally ambiguous world he lives in. Again, the political implications of such an interpretation are quite clear. When it comes to the injustices of the world, no matter how right the liberal

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<sup>100</sup> See for example, Mark Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), p. 72.

middle-class is in its verdict, its promptness in taking a position betrays its ignorance of the contradictory nature of the world and its naïve belief that things can be either good or evil. This lack of imagination must be addressed by the liberal critic who must teach and if possible embody the example of a consciousness fully aware of the tragic element of the human adventure. Such a mind is Sigmund Freud in whose work Trilling finds a powerful expression of such a problematic and who will serve more than any other intellectual figure of our time to justify Trilling's pessimistic and often conservative views on the limits of human will.

In "Freud and Literature" Trilling undertakes to offer at one and the same time a critical but also corrective reading of Freud, one that emphasizes the latter's importance as a great humanist thinker who knew best the limits of the human mind and the extent to which this very mind tries to deny their existence. It is important to make clear though that Trilling does not read Freud in order to find in his psychoanalytical method the hermeneutical keys that would enable him to bring to the surface the latent content of literary works. Instead he reads his work, particularly his 'metapsychological' work, as one that best illustrates the tragic character of human life. So it is Freud the tragic humanist, and not Freud the psychoanalyst, that interests and inspires Trilling most of all. It is the great humanist who says, at least as Trilling interprets him, that man "is not simply good" and that he has "a kind of hell within him from which rise everlastingly the impulses which threaten civilization" (*ibid*, 57). This idea of man confirms Trilling's own reservations about the practical efficacy of the human will and the necessity to acknowledge certain aspects of human life as essentially unalterable and forever beyond our control. The pessimistic tone of Freud's last work is easily accommodated within Trilling's own view about the naivety of liberal intellectuals who believe that under the guidance of reason and with a healthy dose of earnest sentiments all things unworthy of man's dignity can be changed for the better. For Trilling, such a view betrays an intellect embarrassed by the tragic, opting instead to adopt a heroic position,

which strives for change and betterment where a wiser mind would prefer acceptance and patrician contemplation. Trilling finds in Freud someone who believes that man's "best qualities are the result of a struggle whose outcome is tragic" (ibid, 57) and so he considers such pseudo-heroism as an abnegation of the responsibility to be intelligent. What Trilling has in mind is of course the concept of political effectiveness of The Left and the latter's optimism in the potential efficacy of its own plans. For Trilling, however, when such an instrumentalist conception of politics is allowed to be a substitute for the sensitivity of the tragic and the appreciation of the variousness of the human condition, then the liberal mind, and more specifically the literature that springs from it, runs the risk of coming dangerously close to being unintelligent and vulgar, which, for him, are the characteristics of the mode of thinking of the Stalinist Left.

Trilling's reading of Freud may not be the only way of approaching the great psychoanalyst's work but is certainly indicative of the attraction that Trilling felt towards a thinker who exhibited a heightened awareness of the impossibility of any transcendence of human limits. The conservative implications of such a view found an echo in Trilling's own view of the futility or even the stupidity of any intellectual or political project that promises to do away once and for all with all the ills that plague mankind. For Trilling when intelligence falters barbarism becomes a real possibility. Moral realism, the sense of the tragic, a finely modulated consciousness, and the acknowledgment of complexity all preclude easy answers, and by implication of course, any radical, organized political action. What matters most is the preservation of a certain spirit, a vague, yet identifiable, sense of a rich historical past that teaches us by making us realize the limits of our imperious will. Of equal importance is that which makes us suspicious of any ideologies that may have catastrophic effects in case such a will is let free without the counterbalance provided by the realization of the true nature of morality which only great literature can give us. It is this literature that is

most important in our moral education and the taming of our often impetuous will since as Trilling notes in "Art and Fortune":

The novel has had a long dream of virtue in which the will, while never abating its strength and activity, learns to refuse to exercise itself upon the unworthy objects with which the social world tempts it, and either conceives its own right objects or becomes content with its own sense of its potential force - which is why so many novels give us, before their end, some representation, often crude enough, of the will unbroken but in stasis. (ibid, 269).

This powerful example of a will that refuses to violate the existing order, while contemplating its own unfulfilled possibilities, "unbroken but in stasis", is evidently a reminder to Trilling's fellow liberals of the shortcomings of the committed literature they so admire. True literature, and more specifically the classic novel, is about class and, by extension, politics, says Trilling, but not of the materialist, radical kind. For him, the classical realist novel's main interest is, not simply the "interest in illusion and reality as generated by class and money", but the "unabashed interest in ideas" (ibid, 259). This idealistic interpretation of the novel is paralleled in a characteristically oblique fashion by another statement regarding the role of social class as depicted in literature. He writes that "in fiction, as perhaps in life, the conscious realization of social class, which is an idea of great power and complexity, easily and quickly produces intention, passion, thought, and what I am calling substantiality"(ibid, 262) . Referring to the American situation, he notes that "the diminution of class, however socially desirable in many respects, seems to have the practical effect of diminishing our ability to see people in their difference and specialness" (ibid, 262). How are we to interpret this statement? First of all is "the conscious realization of social class", good only for making literary characters, and by extension literature, more substantial, more real? Trilling does not elaborate further in the remainder of his essay and, I believe, one is entitled to read him as implying that class-distinctions have no other function to fulfil than

providing a key narrative element in a properly conceived and executed novel. In other words, if class is a feature of the real world it becomes relevant to us through its fictionalization in literature, preferably in a great realist novel. Secondly, it is certainly very strange that a critic so sensitive to the complexity of the human situation can say that the “diminution of class” makes us see people as more uniform and undifferentiated. This is a preposterous claim, but it does seem adequate in the context of his criticism if we remind ourselves that Trilling consents to any preoccupation regarding social class or status in the novel provided that it is there for enhancing the author’s comprehensive view of the complex social whole and consequently our own reception of it. Class makes fictional characters interesting and real since Trilling believes that their (fictional) manners are “class traits modified by personality”. I would tend to agree with this statement. Manners may very well be class traits modified by our personality. Yet the problem is that, for Trilling, these manners are the only object of literature worthy of our attention. Manners and ideas are, for Trilling, what literature is “of its nature involved with”, because “it deals with man in society, which is to say that it deals with formulations, valuations, and decisions, some of them implicit, others explicit” (ibid, 282). This is one way to look at literature, one which makes sense especially when considered in the context of Trilling’s critical energy partly spent on establishing the essentially fictive character of real, observable, and already comprehensively theorised social entities. Because that is what he attempts to do here, although nowhere does he say that in a straightforward manner.

Politics in the wider sense and politics of class in particular should be confined to the domain of literature so as to provide us – for our edification, to be sure – with the spectacle of man’s battle against his tragic fate. Thus, having become aestheticised as integral elements of any fiction worthy of itself, they can then become effective as instruments of moral awareness. They can become essentially moral concepts as their locus will be the individual soul represented by the classic hero of the realist novel which, Trilling never tires to remind

us, is “a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of the analysis being always manners as the indication of man’s soul” (ibid, 212). Trilling’s own highly idealistic conception of morality, social class and their relation within the context of literature leads us from ‘reality’ to a ‘man’s soul’, with the obligatory, for a liberal mind at least, passage from the ‘social world’. Thus, at one stroke, he condemns literature to effectively becoming depoliticized while wishing for it to play a crucial role in informing the politics of the future.

*The Liberal Imagination* is a book that can hardly conceal its polemical character and its author’s strong faith in the possibility of a rebirth of liberal thought. It is also a project that clearly situates its author at the centre of this set of principles, ideas and beliefs that make up the liberal world-view. Trilling’s role is, if I may use this term loosely, deconstructive. He attempts to interrogate liberal thought from within its own framework of reference, so as to enable it to identify its own blind spots, its uncritically accepted ideological foundations. But at no point does he deny the legitimacy of what he criticizes. His faith in liberalism as the only viable ideological solution for the American middle class, which he often refers to as the ‘educated class’, is unshakeable. Whatever is discussed in the essays included in *The Liberal Imagination* has been chosen for its potentially educational function regarding the liberal attitudes towards literature, morality and politics. As we move forward in time this faith will diminish and some of the certainties implied in these essays will seem less tenable.

#### TOWARDS A STOIC CONCEPTION OF LIFE

In the years following the publication of *The Liberal Imagination* Trilling published two other collection of essays, *The Opposing Self* (1955) and *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956). These essays are mostly occasional pieces disparate in their themes, but interconnected, as Trilling himself admits in his preface to *The Opposing Self*, by the preoccupation, always central to his thought, with the idea of self. What he attempts to establish in these essays is the kind of

selfhood that is most suited to a liberal intelligence, that is the kind of person that could possibly be offered as a model for the liberal audience that he had in mind. The formation of the self is a problem that had always preoccupied him ever since he, at a very early stage in his life, had to negotiate the tensions between his Jewishness and his gentile ambitions, his youthful radicalism and the respectability of Columbia University, and most crucially, his ambition to be an adventurous and great novelist and his often stifling respectability as an academic.

Trilling knows very well that the idea of self he is so eager to promote as exemplary is determined by moral and political ideas and the respective systems based on those ideas. He also knows his contemporaries hold moral and political ideas that do not go very well with the sensitivity and awareness that he believes are the prerequisites of an intelligent, morally enlightened life. Trilling knows all too well that modernism has exerted a great influence on the moral education of his audience. Issues that would be privy to a small over-refined elite are now available to a great number of educated middle-class readers. As a result of this the human experience is now totally different from what it used to be. Armed with a new kind of knowledge, re-educated so as to adapt to the new moral exigencies of a fast-moving and contradictory world the human mind, and especially the liberal mind has taken it upon itself to expand further and explore hitherto uncharted territories. Trilling, given his already documented aversion to such instances of the impetuousness of the human will, is more than cautious and in "William Dean Howells" he warns that when

we yield to our contemporary impulse to enlarge all experience, to involve it as soon as possible in history, myth, and the oneness of spirit - an impulse with which, I ought to say, I have considerable sympathy - we are in danger of making experience merely typical, formal, and representative, and thus of losing one term of the dialectic that goes on between spirit and the conditioned, which is, I suppose, what we mean when we speak of man's tragic fate. We lose, that is to say, the actuality of the conditioned, the literality of matter, the peculiar authenticity and

authority of the merely denotative. To lose this is to lose not a material fact but a spiritual one, for it is a fact of spirit that it must exist in a world which requires it to engage in so dispiriting an occupation as hunting for a house (Trilling, 1955: 93).

This passage may well be read as a token of Trilling's transition from a cautious, yet positive, liberalism to a more conservative version of it. It is true that what we read here is, to a large extent, a statement of a conservative critic but that is not all. What is even more worrying is that this conservatism, so evidently concerned with the imaginative leap toward history and myth, finds no cause for concern in its own reductive representation of reality. 'Hunting for a house' is not merely a 'dispiriting occupation' that we must learn to acknowledge, like all well-mannered, stoic, middle-class men do, but also something that is qualitatively different and certainly not something that can easily qualify as a 'spiritual fact'. Trilling fails to consider, even for the sake of argument, whether any society that is structured in a such a way so as to make people 'hunt for a house' should actually elicit our consent. It seems that despite his often vocal disagreements regarding the liberals' tendency to the Left, what annoyed him most was when certain among them seemed to take their own liberal ideals quite literally. The other, more unimaginative and certainly more passive segment of the American middle-class, seems to provide an instance of a way of life far more congenial to Trilling's increasingly melancholic stoicism.

The unbound will that is totally oblivious to the actuality of human life is one of the things that Trilling's criticism attempts to deal with. The other is the problem of evil and more particularly the question of morality in relation to the great modernist tradition. Trilling is very much aware that modernism has uncovered and dealt with a great deal of what was previously carefully concealed and virtually unspoken of. In other words, it exposed, in its own highly controversial way, much of what was wrong with contemporary society. Trilling hardly ever mentions capitalism as the specific economic form of that society, but instead he



focuses on the changes of the mode of moral awareness that accompanied such a profound cultural change. His main preoccupation is ethics and his framework of reference is modernism. In the context of the new sensitivity, ethics is being understood as the problem of evil. Trilling is aware of the seductiveness of evil and so he acknowledges that

a proper sense of evil is surely an attribute of a great writer, and nowadays we have been drawn to make it almost a touchstone of greatness, drawn to do so in part by our revived religious feelings or nostalgia for religious feelings, but of course also in part by our desire that literature should be in accord with reality as we now know it (ibid, 98-99).

This is of course what happens, but Trilling feels that he needs to warn his readers of the potential dangers of any infatuation with the idea of evil. In so doing, he offers a distinction “between the relation to evil of the creator of the literary work and that of the reader” believing that “the active confrontation of the fact of evil is likelier to be healthy than is the passive confrontation” as “there is something suspect in making evil the object of, as it were, aesthetic contemplation” (ibid, 99). In other words, modernism is too good for its own good. What is initially regarded as the expression of the great minds that produced the revelatory work according to which we judge and measure our own sensitivities, now proves, upon close inspection, to be something potentially dangerous and certainly something that must be treated with caution. This antimodernist turn of his thought should not be regarded as merely accidental or idiosyncratic. On the contrary, it vies with the main tenets of his increasing retrogressive thought at that time. The moral chasm that modernism opens and which threatens by its sheer magnitude to engulf all other moral considerations or alternatives is, for Trilling, one of the most pressing questions. The truth is that behind these moral considerations there is the affluent American society of the Eisenhower era, the integration of a large part of American intellectuals to a system that they traditionally viewed

with great suspicion, and finally Trilling's own ideological consent to the traditional middle-class values and a tacit, although never explicitly pronounced, acceptance of the status quo.

In "George Orwell and the Politics of Truth", in *The Opposing Self*, Trilling makes his increasingly conservative views public by offering us George Orwell as an example of a writer who shows considerable sympathy towards the simple virtues and necessities of life. Trilling applauds Orwell's acceptance of the 'simple man' by noting that the latter "does not dream of a new kind of man", but "is content with the old kind, and what moves him is the desire that this old kind of man should have freedom, bacon, and proper work (ibid, 160)". This populist sentiment is provisionally accepted by Trilling despite its socialist overtones, since it implies the realization of the limits of any modern ideas regarding total transcendence of the current human situation. This simple and relatively uncomplicated view may not offer a great deal to the liberal cause, but at least it instructs us in a more accepting and less invasive mode of thinking. Trilling however is aware that what is read into Orwell's work "the love of personal privacy, of order, of manners, the ideal of fairness and responsibility" are "very simple virtues indeed and they scarcely constitute perfection of either the personal or the future life". Their importance lies in that "they might serve to judge the present and control the future (ibid, 162). The implication is that Orwell's denunciation of orthodox Communist politics "brought about by more than sufficient causes (ibid, 153)" must be seen as a benevolent alternative to the latent radicalism of certain members of the liberal American middle class. What Trilling tries to argue here is that an overtly radical ideology, which almost by definition denies the possibility of occupying the middle ground, is to be rejected in favour of a more accommodating view, even if that entails less imagination and intellectual interest. This new emphasis on the ordinariness of human existence and the virtue of not allowing ourselves to exclude it from our systems of reference is a crucial aspect of Trilling's thought during that stage of his career. A statement, such as the following which instructs us that the "very stupidity of things has something human about it, something

meliorative, something even liberating. Together with the stupidity of the old unthinking virtues it stands against the ultimate and absolute power which the unconditioned idea can develop (ibid, 166)”, only makes sense if we understand the extent to which Trilling came to distrust the influence that Modernism continued to exert on educated liberals. Only a heightened realization of the resistance of the ordinary and a complementary realization of the benefits of respecting the limits imposed by this resistance can save us from the collective delusion of seeing the human world as an open space ready for us to build the gigantic monuments of our uninhibited will. It is the force of this will – bequeathed to us by modernity in the form of the sovereign Reason and made more uncontrollable by its dramatization within the framework of Modernist art – that Trilling fears will finally risk bringing the entire humanist culture to an abrupt end. In his case, this fear is just another expression of the fear of politics, and especially radical politics. A strong will, untroubled by any respect of the sanctity of the ordinary or of the conditioned can lead to political turmoil, civic unrest and even revolution. Trilling wishes to make sure that such an outcome is never to be realised. As far as he is concerned, literature is there to provide plenty of examples of a more enlightened view of human affairs, and morality as inscribed in literature stands close by ready to instruct us that moral realism is far more rewarding than political adventurism.

In “Mansfield Park”, the last essay of *The Opposing Self*, Trilling turns his attention to Jane Austen and offers us a reading that, I believe, sustains my view that his conception of morality is such that repels any political consideration. Trilling discusses *Mansfield Park* as an exemplary work which deals with insincerity as a particularly modern moral vice by highlighting the extent to which society and culture play a part in the moral life. At one point, while he discusses Austen’s subtle elaboration of the themes of personal style and moral seriousness Trilling notes

The idea of morality as achieved style, as grace of ease, is not likely ever to be relinquished, not merely because some writers will always assert it anew, but also because morality itself will always insist on it - at a certain point in its development, morality seeks to express its independence of the grinding necessity by which it is engendered, and to claim for itself the autonomy and gratuitousness of art (ibid, 223).

Trilling is perfectly aware that style can reveal as much as it can conceal and therefore he refuses to fully accept style as something self-evident. Yet, he is prepared to imply that morality is bound by practical considerations and therefore it always seeks to express itself in the manner of aesthetic judgements. But by approaching the gratuitousness of art morality not only finds its own perfection, but also severs any possible ties it may have with politics and the actuality of human existence. A purely aestheticised morality, a prospect to be sure Trilling never fully accepted, is hardly vital to the understanding of literature as criticism of life. Given Trilling's unflinching belief that literature is of value only as a sociohistorical fact, this apparent contradiction speaks volumes about the tensions in Trilling's thought. On the one hand literature as moral lesson is conceived as a weapon against the intellectual vulgarization of the masses and on the other hand this morality inscribed in the pages of the great works seems to long for its self-transcendence and its eventual reincarnation as art.

In "Wordsworth and the Rabbis" Trilling articulates yet another view on morality that would prove to be one of the most controversial pronouncements in his whole career. Trilling argues that "every tragic literature owes its power to the high esteem in which it holds the common routine, and the sentiment of being which arises from it, the elemental *given* of biology" (ibid, 148). This highly significant statement marks Trilling's decisive turn towards the conservative views I hinted at earlier on. This "morality of inertia" which he praises as one of the great discoveries of Wordsworth is the "dull, unblinking round of duties" (Trilling, 1957: 40), it is the moral universe of the simple soul. Trilling is of course sensitive to the more sinister aspects of such a morality and in the *A Gathering of Fugitives* he

wisely notes that this type of morality “may, and often does, yield the immorality of inertia” and he gives the example “of the good simple people, so true to their family responsibilities, who gave no thought to the concentration camps in whose shadow they lived (ibid, 40). Despite this cautionary note, his essay on Wordsworth shows Trilling ready to consider the ‘morality of inertia’ as a powerful reminder of the ‘conditioned’ element in human life. He thinks that any attempt to sidestep it constitutes a moral error. This turn to ‘biological intelligence’, as Daniel O’Hara has forcefully argued, “leaves Trilling open to the accusation (...) that in the guise of modern literary ethics our cold-war liberal proposes an essentially conservative aesthetic of acceptance that is, perhaps unwittingly, ideologically motivated” (O’Hara, 1988: 147). This ideological motivation is brought to the foreground when one considers the manner in which Trilling pursues his defence of the acceptance of the ‘biological given’. By his refusal to discriminate among various degrees of ‘biological facts’, their respective mode of acceptance, and the ramifications of such acts of acceptance in the cultural and political sphere, Trilling leads the way to the indirect articulation of a political quietism which, in principle, “must embrace all established institutions and values as if they were not human creations subject to conscious alteration but facts of nature to be masterfully suffered in virtually sublime silence” (ibid, 147).

From what I have discussed so far it becomes clear that by the mid-fifties Trilling has lost a great deal of the optimism that marked *The Liberal Imagination*. He would now be more concerned with persuading his readers to the virtues of attending closely to what *is* there as opposed to what *should be* there. Trilling would gradually become painfully aware of the discrepancy between, on one hand, the apparent stability of the status quo and all the concomitant positive effects this has for institutional intellectuals like him and, on the other hand, the inherent tendency of the American left-liberal world-view to question this very stability and dream of a more energetic re-arrangement of the social order. Trilling wishes to instruct his fellow liberals in the virtues of accommodation and the necessity to finally and

unequivocally renounce radicalism in all its variants. In this he may be seen as indirectly complicit, without being aware of it, with the ideological mutations behind the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era although, as his one publicly recorded reaction shows<sup>101</sup>, his own attitude was never one of unconditioned capitulation.

#### RE-APPRAISING MODERNISM AND THE FEAR OF A NEW RADICALISM

Almost a decade after the publication of these two collections of essays Trilling published *Beyond Culture* (1965), itself another collection of essays, that shows the ever increasing tension between him and the cultural situation of his time. In the mid-fifties Trilling sought to articulate the fears of a number of liberal intellectuals who regarded modernism as a little too aggressive for our own moral good. By so doing he assumed the role of an 'opposing self' who works against the grain of the prevalent liberal beliefs. A decade later he saw an enemy far more concrete and potentially far more dangerous. The name of that enemy was the New Left and its public and highly publicised image was the rebellious, anti-authoritarian American students, some of whom dutifully attending Trilling's graduate seminars at Columbia. For Trilling these bright young men and women with their refined minds, their awkward manners and their excessive demands epitomized the dangers that he had so eloquently warned against in his previous work. This was modernism in the streets, Joyce and Kafka as intellectual accessories to a generation which had little time for the more profound truths revealed by the Modernist canon. Trilling saw his deepest fears come true and the social, cultural and political unrest as another indication of the liberals' fundamental inability to stop flirting with the excessively radical ideas of the Left. To be sure, Trilling knew well that the American New Left, especially in the forms that he would

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<sup>101</sup> As a response to a McCarthyite investigation into the existence of communists holding positions in American universities Trilling along with three other Columbia professors wrote that such an investigation is unnecessary as it would create an "atmosphere of apprehension and distrust that [would] jeopardize the cause of free inquiry and [threaten] the right to dissent, which is the foundation of civil liberties in a free society." This reply appeared in *The New York Times*, Nov. 18 and 26, 1953. Quoted in Chase, 1980, p. 99.

primarily deal with, was nothing but a historically determined outburst of anti-systemic sentiments, which hardly vied with the main tenets of the traditionally conceived Left. Trilling never really cared about clarity and precision in political matters and therefore it is no surprise that during that time he often dealt with the situation at hand in a manner that betrayed his own inability or unwillingness to make the proper distinctions and the necessary clarifications, especially when that entailed a fundamental reappraisal of his own preconceptions.

In the introduction to *Beyond Culture*, Trilling attempts to discuss the thorny problem of art and cultural determination. Although, in accordance with his expressed views, he does not deny the great force with which culture conditions our thoughts and minds, he does believe – despite the fact that he expresses that belief in his own characteristically indirect manner – that “a primary function of art and thought is to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture in the environmental sense and to permit him to stand beyond it in an autonomy of perception and judgment” (Trilling, 1966: xiii). This passage is indicative of many of Trilling’s views about the relation between art, culture and the individual mind. Art can ‘liberate’ from a certain ‘tyranny’ and enable one to ‘stand beyond’ it. The very process of liberation, the form in which tyranny is overcome will be his main concern in the essays that make up the rest of the volume. In the first essay of the collection “On the Teaching of Modern Literature”, one of the most celebrated and painfully honest pieces Trilling ever published, he discusses his own ambivalence towards modern literature in his capacity as a teacher at Columbia. Speaking as he rarely did in the first person singular, he tells us that his interests led him

... to see literary situations as cultural situations, and cultural situations as great elaborate fights about moral issues, and moral issues as having something to do with gratuitously chosen images of personal being, and images of personal being as having something to do with literary style... (ibid, 13).

This is an extraordinary self-description. In a few lines Trilling gives us the means to understand his own particular mixture of social-mindedness, moral sensitivity, and idealism. The key is, I think, the phrase 'gratuitously chosen images of personal being'. Could he seriously believe that the choice of self-identity is gratuitous? Could he – who at one time was almost denied a permanent job at Columbia for being described as a Marxist, a Freudian and a Jew – really hold that the painful process of constructing an identity is based on factors that are beyond any rational explanation? We must also take note of the sheer audacity with which, despite the powerful rhetorical effect of the paratactic syntax, 'cultural situations' are equated with 'fights about moral issues', as if the entire human history is nothing more than a battleground for the forces of good versus the forces of evil. We may also ask how a critic so sensitive to the trivial materiality of human existence could fail to see the far more decisive forces at play behind any 'cultural' situation. Instead of the acknowledgement of the micro- and macro-politics that affect human lives we are told that ultimately everything comes down to style and therefore is at a seemingly safe distance from any real content that might make us doubt the absolute sovereignty of style. What is at issue here is the acknowledgment of the objectivity of the world and the critic's duty to understand and re-articulate it so that others may understand it as well. The objective aspect of reality that Trilling wishes to play down is the new oppositional voices that threaten to cohere into a comprehensive anti-systemic discourse. He thinks he can achieve that by attributing to them the status of 'gratuitous' act, an act more akin to aesthetics than to politics.

Trilling was troubled by the oppositional (sub)culture which seemed to threaten his own liberal aspirations. His students, who apparently had more in common with this oppositional culture than with Trilling's own high-minded cultural ideas, seemed to him uncomfortably akin to the old left-wing liberals that he had so publicly denounced in the previous decades.



In discussing his students response to the Modernist works they were given as reading assignments, Trilling writes:

I have asked them to look into the Abyss, and both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss, and the Abyss has greeted them with the grave courtesy of all objects of serious study, saying: "Interesting, am I Not? And exciting, if you consider how deep I am and what dread beasts lie at my bottom. Have it well in mind that a knowledge of me contributes materially to your being whole, or well-rounded men (ibid, 27).

This beautiful but cryptic passage shows us that whereas in the fifties Trilling was only voicing his concerns about the highly ambivalent role modernism played in the cultural formations of his era and the moral attitudes towards them, in the mid-sixties he was witnessing his worst fears come true. A whole new generation was being seduced by negativity; a new sensitivity alien to the traditional liberal attitudes seemed to be totally comfortable with what Trilling always regarded as great repositories of the dark truths of our era, that is, with works, which should be approached, as he always believed, with a certain reverence and caution. Yet, before his own bewildered eyes and with complete lack of any awareness of the dangers that this entails, his students seemed to absorb what they read seemingly unaffected by the sheer magnitude of what was written. To Trilling, this was not merely a pedagogical issue but a deeply moral one since, for him, the main function of modernist literature was the moral instruction of any modern mind that wished to come to terms with the often unbearable realities of the twentieth century. It was also a political issue of great importance as Trilling feared that his students' readings only had as an effect "the socialization of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimization of the subversive"(ibid, 27). The seriousness of 'High Modernism' and the respect that it commanded from its readers were now seriously challenged. This was a potential cultural loss, an intellectual and moral impoverishment that Trilling lamented although at the end of

his essay he did go as far as acknowledging the great seductiveness of this dark inverted morality of modernism<sup>102</sup>. By so doing he betrayed his own ambivalent situation as a defender of traditional humanism and at the same time as someone still sensitive and perceptive enough to see that this humanism may be precisely the problem and not the solution.

If the 'adversary culture' – to borrow Trilling's own famous term – of the sixties appeared menacing then the liberal intellectual ought to find a new morality or even a new politics that could counterbalance it. Trilling did not attempt to offer a political solution, but he did try to reformulate the basic presuppositions of a new world-view that could resist the great waves of cultural change. In so doing he would again come back to Freud offering yet another reading of his work. Yet, this time the issue at stake was not the tragic quality of human life, but biology. When Trilling referred to the place of biology in Freud's thought he was not of course referring to what a biologist would most readily identify as a legitimate subject of scientific enquiry. What interested Trilling was not the scientific aspects of Freud's biologism but the moral significance of the biological fact. He was acutely conscious of the dangers of this, but still he believed that "we must stop to consider whether this emphasis on biology, correct or incorrect, is not so far from being a reactionary idea that it is actually a liberating idea (ibid, 113)". The reason why this might be a liberating idea was given by him shortly after. Trilling believed that the idea of biological determination

proposes to us that culture is not all-powerful. It suggests that there is a residue of human quality beyond the reach of cultural control, and that this residue of human quality, elemental as it may be, serves to bring culture under criticism and keeps it from being absolute (ibid, 113).

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<sup>102</sup> "I venture to say that the idea of losing oneself up to the point of self-destruction, of surrendering oneself to experience without regard to self-interest or conventional morality, of escaping wholly from the societal bonds, is an "element" somewhere in the mind of every modern person who dares to think of what Arnold in his unaffected Victorian way called "the fullness of spiritual perfection (ibid, 30)."

This passage is somewhat paradoxical for a critic of Trilling's social and cultural sensitivity. It seems that when culture is perceived to be inimical to the moral good then the only solution is for the individual mind to somehow extricate itself from society and thus save itself from the latter's bad influence. But the argument here goes even further. The implication is that there is something immutable in human nature, something that should be cherished because of its intransigence and its resistance to change. It is true that the problem of the interrelation of biology and history, or in a more general way, of culture and nature, is a huge one as it raises all kinds of ontological, epistemological and ultimately political questions about the limits of man. Yet, Trilling did not seem to realize the complexity of this line of argument. He was adamant that biology must come to the rescue of man in times of great cultural and social fluidity. Biology must resist change and ultimately provide man with a vantage point from which to pass judgment on society. Biology is, as he put it, "a resistance to and a modification of the cultural omnipotence". Trilling was convinced that:

somewhere in the child, somewhere in the adult, there is a hard, irreducible, stubborn core of biological urgency, and biological necessity, and biological *reason*, that culture cannot reach and that reserves the right, which sooner or later will exercise, to judge the culture and resist and revise it (ibid, 115).

It is this judgement and potential revision of culture that Trilling wanted from biology. He wanted the body to be a locus of resistance not in any postmodernist sense but in the rather uninspired sense of it being endowed with an elemental and atemporal Truth that no whim of History could alter or destroy altogether.

Idealist and conservative in equal measure, Trilling's thought needs to be placed in context for us to realize why at this point in his life he chose to turn to a metaphysically conceived 'biological fact' and not to something more congenial to his own past ideas and convictions. I have already discussed the influence Freud exerted on Trilling's thought over

the years and how Trilling has often tried to found his moral criticism on certain readings of the Freudian canon. Yet, Trilling was not the only intellectual to be influenced by Freud. A whole generation of post-Freudians was attempting to re-interpret the great master's work in accordance to their own specific political beliefs. Two of the most prominent members of this generation were Norman O'Brown and Herbert Marcuse. The former published his *Life Against Death* in 1959 and the latter his *Eros and Thanatos* in 1955. Both these books, each in its own way, privilege a reading of Freud that clearly values the instinct of life against the death-instinct. They both argue for a more liberated sexuality and they also note the correlation between death-instinct (Brown) or oppressed sexuality (Marcuse) and capitalism. They both start from the body conceived as a materiality of potentially revolutionary proportions and end with a sustained and far-reaching critique of capitalism's demands on human beings and of the effects that the satisfaction of such demands has on the human soul. The body, pleasure and human desire are for them, as they would soon be for a whole generation of young dissatisfied middle-class rebels, weapons that could be used for the overthrow of an oppressive status quo. There was no way one could not see the huge political implications of such interpretations nor could one ignore – and certainly not Trilling – the impact of such theorizations on the literature of the era, most notably on the Beat Generation and others, like Norman Mailer. Against these left-wing, ultra-progressive interpretations Trilling offered his own conservative one. For him, the Freudian death-instinct was there to remind us of the ultimate limit of our human experience and we should see it as something that far from promoting pessimism or negation instructs us in that we humans wish to die “only through the fullness of [our] appropriate life” (ibid, 87). The ‘biological fact’ that Trilling refers to is a response to the progressivism of post-war neo-Freudian thought. As William Chase argues this school of thought “adhered to Marxist notions of social determination and social engineering” and therefore “it sought to argue for the ‘social’ as the real area of human liberation” (Chase, 1980: 137). Trilling knew all too well

that this old liberal dream of human reason emerging victorious after his battle with the irrationality of human existence is nothing more than a thinly disguised delusion of grandeur. There is a limit to the gratifications we can at each time demand from the world around us and a moral realist like Trilling found in biology a concept of great oppositional strength in relation to the hedonistic progressivism of his time.

#### FEAR OF EXCESS: THE CONSERVATIVE SIDE OF A LIBERAL MIND

Seven years after the publication of *Beyond Culture* Trilling publishes his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures given at Harvard under the title *Sincerity and Authenticity*. This book, which was to be the last one published in his lifetime, traces the historical evolution of the two concepts of 'sincerity' and 'authenticity' in an attempt to construct a kind of moral historiography of modernity. Trilling's main thesis is that early modernity starts with 'sincerity', in other words the compliance to standards which are to be found outside the individual and which are inscribed in the social and cultural fabric of history. At a certain point in time – roughly near the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century – this key foundational ideal is substituted by 'authenticity', in other words the compliance to the demands of one's inner nature or 'essence'. This is, of course, an undertaking of considerable proportions and Trilling does manage to offer a vivid, informed and often very seductive overview of this gradual mutation of the 'sincere' into the 'authentic'. In his endeavour Trilling uses as main points of reference many of the authors and philosophers that, during his career, have offered him the best examples of a morally conscious literature and philosophy. Among the most important works he draws upon are Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Jane Austin's *Mansfield Park*. Through his readings of these works Trilling attempts to identify the historical, and more specifically the cultural evolution of Western morality from its initial state as an ideological system based on public discourse to its gradual

transformation into another system based on the idea of authenticity. In the latter system the main criterion of judgement is to be found in the depths of the individual soul and not in the socially sanctioned moral norms of any society. This is a transition, or so Trilling presents it, from a state where objective standards guide the individuals in their moral behaviour and beliefs to a state where purely subjective standards, emanating from a human soul schooled in Romantic ideals, now dictate the moral course the individual must choose. The last two centuries are, for Trilling, marked by the regulatory idea of authenticity. In so far as the present time is concerned, the time-frame that matters to him most, he clearly states that the dream of being authentic has undergone such radical transformation that it poses a visible threat to the foundations of Western civilization as we know it. Trilling mentions certain names which embody all that has gone wrong with the principle of authenticity as it has been carelessly applied to all kinds of human practice. His main targets are Herbert Marcuse, Norman O' Brown and R. D. Laing, along with others like Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault who only make a passing appearance in the last pages of his book. Before I examine Trilling's quarrel with the New Left I must first look more closely at the main argument of his book.

Trilling starts by attempting to account for the high status 'sincerity' enjoyed as a moral quality from the beginning of what we now call 'modernity' to the end of the eighteenth century. Using mainly literary sources, he argues that sincerity is a historically determined moral ideal proper to those societies that first developed after the demise of feudalism. In other words sincerity is a typically bourgeois moral ideal that is born out of the necessity to establish certain rules of conduct fit for a rational management of these societies. It is interesting that Trilling notes that the very idea of 'society' as opposed to, e.g., 'kingdom' is in very close dialectical relation with the idea of 'sincerity'. There can be no understanding of one unless there is a complementary understanding of the other. Sincerity acts like an ideological bond for these kinds of societies. It guarantees that there is correspondence

between the avowed intentions of the citizens and the moral principles of the societies in which they live. Yet, sincerity as regulative moral ideal does more than that. It constructs a new kind of subjectivity which is characterized by its internalization of a certain moral imperative. To be sincere as this moral imperative commands means to will truthfully what is objectively considered as acceptable or right. It means to conform with the prevailing societal norms and serve the interest of the common good and not one's individual inner wishes. Sincerity is squarely on the side of society and its effects are predicated on the capacity of society to elicit a strong moral commitment from its individual members. However, after two centuries of unchallenged supremacy, sincerity seems to subside and another moral attitude takes its place. This attitude is authenticity and for Trilling the work that dramatizes this profound ideological and moral shift is *Rameau's Nephew*. Trilling discusses this work in conjunction with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* attempting to survey this crucial era and so identify the precise content of the transition from sincerity to authenticity. In so doing, Trilling reads Hegel as the philosopher who contributed more than anyone else to the legitimization of 'authenticity' for our contemporary sensibilities. Hegel, according to Trilling, saw that the spirit's alienation from itself is a precondition of progress, of the forward movement towards self-realization. The 'honest soul' that embodies the ideal of sincerity is to be rejected as it does nothing to promote the true interests of the spirit. What is to be valued is the Rousseauian *âme déchirée*, or 'disintegrated consciousness', that is the soul proper to the modern man. This consciousness is not anymore concerned with the objective morality of society, but with the subjective morality that is poetically expressed in the sleepless nights and the despair of the young Werther and in a more extreme manner in the clownish phantasmagoria of Jean-François Rameau, the hero of Diderot's book.

Trilling follows his survey by examining *Mansfield Park*, reading it as a corrective to Hegel's enthusiastic acceptance of modern spiritual alienation. For Trilling, Jane Austen is preoccupied by her desire to establish the moral supremacy of the 'sentiment of being', a

sentiment also central to Wordsworth's poetry which Trilling often presents as exemplary in this regard. Jane Austen's novel is read as one of the most serious objections to the tendencies that threaten "the 'noble' mode of life and the 'honest soul'" (Trilling, 1974: 76). In contrast with Hegel's dialectical refinement her work is 'categorical'. It goes against the typically modern idea that "the enlightened and generous mind can discern right and wrong and good and bad only under the aspect of process and development, of futurity and the interplay and resolution of contradictions" (ibid, 79). Trilling knows that this is hardly an imperative that can find a place in our modern sensibilities and yet at the end of his discussion he frankly acknowledges that "when its first unease has been accommodated, it can be seen to have in it a curious power of comfort" (ibid, 80). So Trilling, torn between his status as a modern critic and his pre- and even anti-modern sensibilities, asserts his own contradictory feelings about modernity and its discontents.

The book continues with an examination of several canonical works of Western literature like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Conrad's *In the Heart of Darkness* and Trilling also discusses – as is always the case with him – Freud, especially the later Freud of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. His treatment of Freud is very much a recapitulation of what Trilling saw in the Freudian work from the fifties onwards. It focuses on the ability of Freud's work to show us the unsurpassable limits of our human situation. There are of course certain new and highly suggestive inflections that establish analogies between Freud's work and the Book of Job as when Trilling asserts that Freud "propounds and accepts the mystery and the naturalness – the natural mystery, the mysterious naturalness – of suffering" (ibid, 157). Interestingly enough, Trilling goes even further by finding parallels between Freudian thought and Christian religion. In this parallelism, the implication is that the latter has become historically obsolete, so the former rightfully comes to take its place since they are both firmly grounded on the ultimate realization of the tragicalness of human life and, like all religions or their



substitutes, give us a reason to believe that life has a meaning. It is to this belief that Trilling refers when he notes that

however harsh and seemingly gratuitous a fate may be, the authenticity of its implicit significance is not to be denied, confirmed as it is by the recognition of *some* imperative which has both brought it into being and prescribed its acceptance, and in doing so affirmed the authenticity of him to whom the fate is assigned" (ibid., 158).

It is easy to ridicule this quasi-mystic and utterly conservative view by merely noting that not many victims of the current state of affairs seem to be – in any commonly intelligible manner – content with their own fate just because it is theirs and theirs only. Yet, Trilling's statement must be taken seriously, not because it is right, but because it eventually leads us to understand the profound unease with which Trilling, this self-professed liberal, feared change, especially radical change and how much he valued a kind of stoic passivity and tacit acceptance of the existing order of things. It is interesting to note that in the above statement the significance of fate is confirmed by the recognition of some imperative which Trilling never specifies. This may be a religious imperative, although Trilling does not have anything like that in mind. What he does have in mind though is what he read in Arnold, Forster, Wordsworth and Freud: the acceptance of the fact that certain things in our world have certain limits which men should not attempt to cross since such a violation would lead to a life unbearably light and without substance, a life in which there is no realization of complexity, variousness and the omnipresence of the tragic. To Trilling such a life would ultimately prove to be an inauthentic life, diminished in quality due to the 'weightlessness of all things' that Nietzsche, Trilling reminds us<sup>103</sup>, feared would prevail in a godless universe. In his last published discussion of Freud's work Trilling attempts a reading that is meant to provide a more profound justification to his increasingly conservative views regarding social

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<sup>103</sup> In the last chapter of *Sincerity and Authenticity*, entitled "The Authentic Unconscious".

change. His argument is that given Freud's contention that the super-ego maintains its hegemony over the ego even after its services are no longer needed and since this 'imperialism' of the super-ego cannot be reduced or explained away by recourse to the nature of society there must follow the sober realization that the human situation is much more resistant to fundamental, radical change than the progressive liberals believe it to be. Freud's topology of human consciousness provides Trilling with an incentive for articulating his own brand of cultural and mainly political pessimism. Reading into Freud's work an argument against any 'melioristic schemes of social reconstruction'<sup>104</sup> Trilling lays out the ideological foundation for his advocacy of the wisdom of acceptance in contradistinction to the desire for change characteristic of the New Left.

The rest of the book and the main cause of its notoriety among certain critics is a polemic against a new generation which, in stark contrast to Trilling, chose to renegotiate the Freudian heritage in a way that could eventually lead to a free and more expansive life. Trilling takes them to task for forgetting, or pretending to forget, the limits which are imposed in any effort to transcend unhappiness and social oppression. His criticism is based on the following argument: any transcendence, such as it is envisaged by the New Left spokesmen he attacks, must by necessity negate the principles upon which our current life is structured. Such a negation would, by its sheer dynamism, destroy the intricate semantic webs of shared meaning and would lead to a situation where we would be unable to make any value judgment as even the concept of value itself would be hardly usable. In short the 'polymorphous perverse' of O'Brien, the 'libidinal revolution' of Marcuse and the 'liberating 'madness' of Laing all lead us to the lamentable situation where the

falsities of an alienated world are rejected in favour of an upward psychopathic mobility to the point of divinity, each one of us a Christ – but with none of the inconveniences of undertaking

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<sup>104</sup> I am borrowing this phrase from Nathan A. Scott's *Three American Moralists: Mailer, Bellow, Trilling*, p. 208.

to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and to funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished" (ibid, 171-72).

The result is, as Trilling saw it, a solipsistic universe where people as social monads can never really engage in anything related with the actual world as we perceive it. Trilling was very perceptive, as all gifted conservatives are, when he identified and attacked the most extremist positions of his ideological adversaries, but in this case one cannot help coming to the conclusion that he missed the point. The metonymical use of 'madness' was not something Trilling was sensitive enough to perceive, nor did he ever see the political implications of his adversaries' ideas. What he did see was the threat they posed to the existence of a certain order, which no matter how much Trilling disliked it was for him still the only cultural and political order worth preserving. Trilling was acutely aware of the shortcomings of the poetics and the rhetoric of radical progressivism but he was ultimately unwilling to confront the far more compromising aspects of the liberal ideal he so clearly defended.

#### THE UNEASY MORAL AND POLITICAL STATUS OF LIBERALISM IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA: AN APPRAISAL OF TRILLING'S CRITICAL THOUGHT

Trilling's work shows his importance as a moral critic and his relevance to any ethical-political discussions of the role of criticism in the present day. Although his work founded no school of criticism it was at its time one of the most interesting and in some ways exemplary instances of a criticism sensitive to the ideological demands of its time and attentive to the social and by extension political aspect of literature. His social and political sensibilities are expressed through the medium of a morally inflected criticism which systematically attempts to articulate a new critical language based on moral rather than purely

aesthetic categories. This attempt which lasted for nearly thirty years led Trilling from the optimistic liberalism of the forties and the early fifties to the more detached and pessimistic views of the sixties and the early seventies. In other words, from the belief that there was a possibility and a responsibility of re-educating the liberal middle-classes to the realization that such a re-education or refinement of cultural and moral sensibilities was more an ideal pursuit than a realistic one. What I aim to do in this part of my discussion is to explore how some of the key elements of Trilling's thought related to the dominant ideological currents in post-war America.

One of the most central concepts in Trilling's criticism is the concept of the self. Around this concept Trilling constructs his critical system in opposition to the leftist and, in his view, crudely sociologicistic critical systems of his time. Trilling's early works – up to and including the *Liberal Imagination* – exhibited a critical spirit still very much concerned with the world's social and political actuality. His idealism was already evident even then, but his optimistic belief in the relative superiority of liberal ideas and the necessity to expand on them did not allow him to acquiesce in the status of the (slightly disillusioned) critic who only observes the adventures of the common men from above as if he is somehow disconnected from the rest of the world, a position that Trilling would later assume without much trouble.

Trilling's first period is very much a product of his contradictory influences; left and progressivist ideas on the one hand, Victorian moralism on the other. Working through these contradictions is what makes the *Liberal Imagination* such an interesting book. In it we see how politics and morality are at the intersection of literature and criticism. But that is not all. Below the surface we see that politics is only an illusion, an ideological *trompe l'oeil*, its manifestation is nothing else but a rather abstract and general background which frames the main argument. As William Chase correctly points out in discussing Trilling's attitude towards politics: "society and history are (...) rendered (...) ancillary to what [Trilling] saw as a more serious and exalted pursuit", which is in fact a kind of literary criticism whose "high-

flown nature owes much to his transcendence of certain forms of local identity and local circumstance” (Chase, 1980: 11-12). The result is of course a marginalization of real history and its substitution with an idealized conception of it. According to Chase, this history “in which Trilling was so decisively uninterested” is considered by virtue of this substitution “as no more than a setting against which a real event – an event of the mind and the critical imagination – takes place”(ibid, 11-12). Trilling’s main argument, drawn from the ideological resources of classical bourgeois liberalism, did not so much need politics, at least not in the sense this word can have for a critic inspired by the Left, as it needed a certain temper, an attitude towards the world that does not completely exclude the political as long as the latter is transformed almost beyond recognition. As Mark Krupnick argues, by the mid-forties “there was a conflict within the first generation of New York intellectuals between their political hope for a socialist society and their commitment to the American ethos of acculturation and success” (Krupnick, 1986: 188). Trilling was the critic that forcefully articulated these conflicting aspirations and the one to attempt to negotiate critically a passage to a new situation, where acculturation and success would not carry the negative connotations still attributed to them by certain left-leaning intellectuals. Therefore, it is not surprising that Trilling built his moral-aesthetic system on the assumption of an individual consciousness which, in true Hegelian fashion, moves gradually toward self-realization. This idea of the self is directly related to Trilling’s own experiences during the thirties and particularly to his renunciation of socialist ideas in favour of the liberal conceptions of self and society. During the thirties there was a marked tendency to consider the self as an amalgam of various, heterogeneous determinations, among which class determinations were considered to have the greatest significance. Trilling saw this as degradation of the ‘variousness and complexity’ of the human soul, and although he never completely refused to take social class into account he did in fact consider it a phenomenon of secondary importance. As I argued earlier on he contended that by acknowledging social class one

could produce even finer literature and never did he seem to believe that this acknowledgement is a powerful critical tool in the examination of the social, economic, and political organisation of society.

In the later phase of his career Trilling came to regard the 'self', now increasingly perceived as the sole uncorrupted entity in a corrupt world, as a normative ideal. This 'self' became even more disconnected from actual society, predicated as it was on the assumption that it alone held a privileged, even a unique position, in the order of things, whereas all things social and by extension political were perceived as conspiring against its moral purity. The more American culture became complex and seemingly impenetrable to Trilling's critical powers the more he took his distance from the social-political context that informed his early work and moved towards the aesthetic-metaphysical conception of selfhood that characterized his work in the sixties and the seventies. This transition from the social to the aesthetic is vitally important for understanding his work, as it gives us an indication of the ideological tensions that Trilling had to negotiate in a period (the sixties) when many of his key assumptions were to be challenged. The moral inflection of his early work, which was a product of an immediate awareness of actual needs and aspirations, gradually lost its connectedness with the world and became a style, an attitude, a feature of the individual mind which bestowed the agent a certain value to the extent that was a gesture of appreciation, not unlike an aesthetic judgement. The moral self in Trilling's later works was a self that selected a certain style, one that vied with its own conception of the good life. It is not always very clear what was the 'good life' according to Trilling but his essays in the fifties give us more than a clue. In them and particularly in the Keats, Wordsworth, and Orwell essays we see that middle-class values are the best foundation for a life still in touch with the sense of the tragic, a life that does not wish to be oblivious to the radical irresolution of the mysteries of the world.

This privileging of middle-class values is best understood as a 'symptom' of the interaction between two closely related spheres. The first is Trilling's personality and the other is the social and political situation of America after World War II. In as far as the former is concerned it is worth noting that Trilling was for a long time torn between his progressivism and his deep-rooted need for acceptance by the gentile world. His progressivism, part and parcel of the Jewish milieu in which he took his first steps as an intellectual, found itself in a uneasy relationship with his need to assert himself in a world in which he believed such an act could have any practical and psychological value. That world was of course the world of Ivy League Columbia, a bastion of traditional humanism<sup>105</sup> and a place where an upwardly mobile Jewish intellectual like Trilling could prove himself as equal if not better than his gentile colleagues. As far as the political situation in which he found himself is concerned the picture is radically different. Post-war America saw an intensification of all things that would eventually make it a world power of fearsome proportions. Capitalist economy was to progress unencumbered by the opposition of the thirties. The Cold War initiated a new era where the limits for political dissent became even more narrow, and the new consumerist orientation of the economy was to intensify all means for the institution of 'middle-class', happily consuming America as the supreme ideal to be emulated by all. The American dream and the ideological docility this entailed were a brute cultural and sociological fact in Trilling's time. In addition to that, the defeat of the Left and the complex process of ideological re-positioning of the surviving left-wing intellectuals provided a fertile ground for a thorough re-examination of the radical aspirations of earlier times and an attempt at establishing some sort of a *modus vivendi* between critical intellect and power. In the fifties Trilling, apparently content with the situation he described, famously

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<sup>105</sup> Mark Krupnick (1986) discusses this in greater detail and he argues that "Columbia's humanistic ideal of moral-aesthetic refinement had as its social counterpart a conception of the university as a bulwark against political radicalism. (...) Trilling adapted both parts of the Columbia ethos - its concern with refinement and its opposition to radicalism - to the critique of "the liberal imagination" that established his reputation in the forties.", p. 50.

declared that the 'party of money' and the 'party of mind' were no longer in opposition thus paving the way for a politically suspect and potentially dangerous relation between the two.<sup>106</sup>

This conservative turn to middle-class values is very important to my discussion as it shows how quickly the progressive liberal project mutated into a neo-conservative apology of the status quo. It matters little if Trilling himself actually endorsed all that was implicit in his work. His privileging of middle-class values may be seen as an ideological ploy, a cunning manoeuvre which aimed at enhancing the results of his previous efforts. I have already remarked how problematical Trilling's relation with actual politics was. William Chase has argued that, in relation to the *Liberal Imagination*, Trilling "seems prepared to resist the shadow of politics, past and present" and yet "politics, impelling him everywhere to make dense the complexities of literature and life, nonetheless makes its claim upon him" (ibid, 97). That was exactly what Trilling wished to avoid: the fatal attraction of real politics for he knew that his whole critical system would be contaminated by too close a proximity with the actual political struggles of his time. He was aware that if one wishes to articulate a moral kind of criticism, and moreover, if one wishes to do that by adopting the point of view of the individual mind, one should be very cautious as to how much of real history one would want to admit into one's critical system. Trilling's solution took the form of the acceptance of those values that were the least amenable to any sort of 'ideological', that is left-wing or overtly progressive, influences. Such values would permit the mind to find a resting place in reality and they would also allow the world to be seen 'as it is' without any ideological embellishments. Consequently the mysteries of the human situation would reveal themselves to the patient, observing and properly educated observer who, guided by Trilling's criticism, would in turn realize that the order of the world is not to be violated but appreciated in the manner one appreciates a great novel or a painting. The individual mind implied in this view

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<sup>106</sup> Trilling himself proved the point by getting involved with *Encounter*, and *Perspectives*, the former a British magazine funded by the CIA and the latter a quarterly launched and funded by the Ford Foundation. For more information see Krupnick, 1986, p. 102.



is the mind of a connoisseur, refined and sensitive and, most importantly, passive. It is the passivity inherent in middle-class values that Trilling values so much as this passivity enables him to construct his moral criticism as an ideal refuge from history and politics, and an equally ideal means of dealing with the most historically related aspects of literature without allowing for an overall critique of the society within which this literature is created.

That is the reason why the embracing of middle-class values went hand-in-hand with his re-evaluation of modernism. Trilling saw that modernist works cannot be easily, if at all, accommodated to the moral and cultural aspirations of the middle classes. Therefore, he began to view them as potentially destructive works. He believed that this 'ideological' destructiveness had to be counterbalanced by a new ideological formation that would promote not agitation but assurance and acceptance. So, along with Kafka and Joyce, Howells and Orwell must take their place in the imaginary museum of liberal sensibility, so that the darkness lurking beneath the surface which modernism had been so good at revealing must be illuminated by the consoling narratives that see a special kind of dignity in man's passive contemplation of the world. This tragic knowledge, as Robert Boyers aptly describes it, is, for Trilling, "an exalted form of wisdom and is founded on painful awareness of irremediable contradictions in the fabric of life" (Boyers, 1977: 46). Because of that it enables the mind that possesses it to see that beauty may reside even in those places one would not normally expect to find it. In plain words that meant that no matter how suffocating middle-class values might be they were the best foundation for a life which was as far removed from the extremes of (working-class or bourgeois) ignorance and stupidity on the one hand and (working-class or bourgeois) radicalism on the other. The result, as Chase succinctly puts it, is that "in an age well-known for its political conformity and quietism, an age tranquilized by the American president of the time and by the satisfactions of widely shared consumer affluence, Lionel Trilling went about creating a sophisticated means by

which he and his fellow intellectuals, all the readers of the little magazines, could surrender to the status quo.” (ibid, 108).

But that was not the only thing that Trilling aimed at. His implicit aim was the formation of a liberal middle-class consciousness that could be at the same time both sensitive and yet unmoved by real injustices, intelligent and yet ignorant to the hardships of others, flexible but not too eager to embrace anything radical. This refined consciousness would, by virtue of its distance from the actual world, offer itself a living testimony to the inadequacies of any secular power. It would be, as Daniel O’Hara comments, an “ironic witness to the barbarous crudities of established power, regardless of its official orientation ‘left or right’” (O’Hara, 1988: 202). O’Hara is right to observe that “this ideal of aesthetic humanism from Schiller and Arnold to Richards and Trilling does not seem so much reactionary or even quaint as a sublime blank in the cultural memory” (ibid, 2002). Yet one cannot help but see that this aesthetic humanism, coinciding as it did with McCarthyism and with the Korean War in the fifties and the Vietnam War in the following two decades, with the virtual disappearance of any credible organized labour movement and the intensification of capitalism inside and imperialistic excursions outside, was something more than a sublime blank in the cultural memory; it was in fact a formidable ally in the propaganda war that was waged in America during that period.

This leads my discussion to the examination of class in Trilling’s work. There is no doubt that class considerations play a crucial part in Trilling’s criticism. But their consideration is of a certain quality, which is at odds with what we are most prepared to accept as legitimate use. As I have already discussed, they are taken into account, to the extent that they do not lead to any fundamental re-examination of the social structure of society. Class determinations are considered as integral parts of the human situation in the modern world and any knowledge of these makes the (real or fictional) agent sensitive to certain aspects of his existence which would otherwise be obscured. Basically this knowledge serves its purpose by existentially

enhancing any conception of the world. It also has, in Trilling's conception of it, stabilizing social effects. This is due to the fact that he only considers class as something that should ideally be accepted for what it is, that is a historically-specific mode of being in the world. There is no question of drawing any other conclusions from such a realization of social difference. What really matters is for one to embrace one's own class difference with a certain pride in a way not unlike one nowadays expects any disadvantaged group to embrace and maybe even celebrate its not complying with the standards of physiological or social 'normalcy'. To this end Trilling finds inspiration in nineteenth-century English writers. In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Trilling has this to say on the issue of class in Victorian England

[The English novelists of the nineteenth century] would all of them appear to be in agreement that the person who accepts his class situation, whatever it may be, as a given and necessary condition of his life will be sincere beyond question. He will be sincere *and* authentic, sincere because authentic. Indeed, the novelists understand class to be a chief condition of personal authenticity; it is their assumption that the individual who accepts what a rubric of the Anglican catechism calls his "station and its duties" is pretty sure to have a quality of integral selfhood. (...) His sentiment of being, his awareness of his discrete and personal existence, derives from his sentiment of class. (Trilling, 192: 115-15)

Nowhere in his work does Trilling explicitly accept what is described here as the model that contemporary American society should follow, and yet nowhere does he give any indication that this is not a view shared by him. Trilling knows that his nostalgia for Victorian social and moral rigidity is not a viable proposition for the ills of his time. Although he is aware, as always, of the reactionary character of these views, Trilling is nevertheless attracted to them for their sense of order, well-drawn social boundaries, and the ample space they provide (especially for the privileged upper middle-class) for living the moral life. He saw his

contemporary middle-class as a social and cultural formation far beneath the cultural, and more specifically ideological, status of the nineteenth-century English middle-class.

One of the reasons he saw such a difference was the fact that contemporary middle-class mentalities or world-views seemed to proceed unchallenged by any formidable ideological adversaries. In the beginning of the *Liberal Imagination* Trilling maintained that contemporary conservative thought had lost its intellectual vitality and therefore could offer no real challenge to liberal ideology. Therefore in order for the liberal ideology to shape up and take a long hard look at its own deficiencies there should be a real or fictive ideological adversary. Trilling invented such an adversary to which he gave the name of Stalinism, a concept that in Trilling works is to understood as having not so much a positive content (what it is) but rather a negative one (what it is not). Stalinism was what liberalism was not and to make things even worse this inverted image of liberalism was constantly exerting a strong influence on the way liberals perceived of the world. Where there should have been appreciation of 'variousness and complexity' there was dogmatism and militancy. Where there should have been an acknowledgment of the limits of human reason there was an imperious reconstructive will, lethal to the extent that it believed that all can be eventually altered to fit its image of moral and political perfection. For Trilling the road to the radical abolition of any and all injustices is paved with crimes and is characterized by the hubristic attempt to violate a cosmic order that should not be tampered with.

It is true that nowhere did Trilling write anything that could be perceived as an outright endorsement of capitalism, its economy or the ethos it endorses. As Krupnick argues "if we speak of Trilling as a conservative, it is not as an economic or political conservative" and he then adds that in as far as his relation to the nineteenth-century England is concerned "Trilling's aesthetic of personality is linked to the nineteenth-century middle class, but he consistently distinguishes between the cultural attitudes of that class and the economic basis of those attitudes" (Krupnick, 1986: 179). This is to a large extent true but one can

nevertheless rightfully challenge the legitimacy of such a distinction. No cultural attitude is or should be examined apart from the economic basis of the society within which it is articulated and therefore one who writes so approvingly of such a culture, as Trilling does, must tacitly (even if somewhat unwittingly) accept the material basis of such a culture. You cannot have a certain culture or certain cultural ideals in circulation without a political, economic, and social organization that provides the framework within which each person can or cannot pursue these ideals. Trilling betrays not only his conservatism but also his ideologically crippling idealism by refusing to take into account the actual history upon which his chosen moral and cultural systems were predicated.

Trilling was a critic who single-mindedly focused upon ideology and the effects it has on human and most particularly liberal consciousness. He consistently did this irrespective of what his subject matter was. Victorian England and Eisenhower's America were, for him, both islands in the vast ocean of ideas. As Mark Schechner pointedly argues in relation to Trilling's contemporary historical sensibilities

such sensitivity to the dominion of ideas over character, based as it was upon a belief in their power to transform life, was brought at a price. Here as elsewhere, Trilling suppressed those dimensions of reality boosted by insurgent realism: the depression, the hunger, the evictions, the bloody labor wars, the advances of Fascism in Europe – in short the general desperation” (Schechner, 1987: 75).

The reference is on Trilling's disparaging account of the realism of left-wing authors and critics of previous generations such as Theodore Dreiser and V. L. Parrington. Yet it also holds true for all of Trilling's dealings with literature. The exclusive focus on ideology removed from any actual political and economic circumstances led Trilling to consider culture as a sphere where one can suffer or achieve all sorts of things; and yet at the same time he refused to account for the mechanisms that put this sphere in motion. But there is

also another aspect of his idealism. Culture as conceptualised by Trilling is the ideal place one could wish to occupy should one wish to survey society without allowing oneself to get too specific about practical issues. Culture becomes aestheticised and thus functions as the ideal repository of all the values that society threatens to destroy. It matters little to Trilling whether society moves to the left or to the right. What matters is that there must be a place from which all other considerations and particularly moral considerations must be weighted and judged.

Trilling did not wish to examine the material basis upon which his ideals were predicated. By renouncing any attempt to dialectically examine literature and society Trilling devised his own version of dialectics, a kind of pseudo-Hegelian dialectics of two stages, a thesis and an antithesis that are locked in their mutual contradictory state without any real possibility of transcendence. As Gregory Jay has argued “in place of a materialist dialectics (...) Trilling would propose a psychological aesthetics that at once removed the Literary Mind from capitalism’s history and empowered its status – however tragic, alienated, and impotent – as the ‘opposing self’” (Jay, 1989: 573). It is this ‘opposing self’, which is the ideal inhabitant of this idealized cultural space, I spoke of earlier. A judge of the dogmatic barbarism of the Left and the threatening vulgarity of mass-society, an appreciator of the tragic quality of life and one content with “an imagination that refused to be violated by ideas” that is “to be dominated by any singular conception of reality under whose auspices one could pretend in all good conscience that no other version of the true or real might command respect” (Boyers, 1977: 30). This ‘opposing self’, which in Trilling’s work is but the ideal version of the liberal self he wished to educate, has its own system of ideas and its own language. This language is more than anything else moral both in its conception and in its stated intent. I shall now attempt to clarify what this moral character consists of.

In Trilling’s critical method moral criteria of evaluation take the place of either a purely textual approach or an overtly politicized one. They function so as to preserve the centrality

of the 'individual mind' in the system of literary appreciation and thus marginalize those social or cultural issues that would potentially shift the focus to a more political reading of literature. In Trilling, morality guarantees that any such issues will be translated into a code whose constitutive binary oppositions will be in Trilling's own terminology, complex and life-enhancing on the one side of the opposition or vulgar and life-demeaning on the other. In order to do so Trilling's moral criticism moves a little too far into the realm of aesthetics. Occasionally, it does so to such an extent that it is tempting to designate his critical method as a hybrid aesthetic-moral method in which traditional moral issues are aestheticised and aesthetic issues are moralized. This double transformation, which eventually leads to the mutation of both categories, succeeds in isolating his criticism from actual history at the same time that it allows him to use this history in its highly idealized form as an integral part of his critical method. Trilling's use of moral criticism should be thought of as an ideal means of promoting his own liberal education to the American middle-classes. It was ideal because it enabled him to make use of those concepts that would prove the most effective in his moral-pedagogical project without risking touching upon those aspects that would force him and his audience alike to reconsider certain fundamental aspects of their life and the sociopolitical situation in which they found themselves in.

Trilling wished to change the relation between 'intellect' and 'power' and he consistently tried to argue that the American middle class should also embrace this possibility of coexistence between political and economic power, on the one hand, and intellectual pursuits on the other. What liberals traditionally viewed with caution Trilling wanted to present as a desideratum of the modern era. A moral criticism like the one he employed permitted him to do exactly that. By positing that criticism and literature provided a formidable area of intellectual and moral excellence, middle-class liberals could get accustomed to the idea that they could in some ways influence real politics provided that they would not forget that their contribution to the political well-being of the nation rested upon the fact that they possessed

a special kind of moral knowledge and sensitivity that real politics lacked. To assume a moral and intellectual superiority vis-à-vis those who held real economic and political power was the best way to fantasise about effective political and cultural intervention, when in fact the only thing that should preoccupy this liberal middle-class was their political and (somewhat less so) cultural impotence.

Cornel West has argued that the politics of Trilling's criticism served yet another purpose. Commenting on the relation between Trilling and his middle-class audience, West argues that

Trilling's apparently abstract formulations of the circumstantial and conditioned character of human will are intended as moral guidelines for the energies of [the middle class]. He wanted to guide them away from the simplicities of the left and infuse their cold war and corporate liberalism with a sense of the tragic. (...) literature and literary criticism were political precisely because at their best they could disclose the blindnesses and rigidities of ideological orthodoxies, especially those of the left. (West, 1989, 171).

What is argued here brings yet another aspect of Trilling's criticism to our attention: his desire to purge liberal middle-class thought from all traces of left radicalism and re-formulate a liberal ideology that would be sensitive to society and politics while leaving both virtually unaffected. The middle classes must think and act, but in ways radically different from what they used to. Trilling knew that there is tendency inherent in liberalism which dictates that one should not only be sensitive to the injustices of the world, but one should also do something to abolish them. When the only outlet of such a desire is the one provided by the practices of the Left it is no wonder that Trilling could say in a symposium held in 1948 that "Stalinism becomes endemic in the American middle class as soon as that class begins to think" (Trilling, 1948: 888-89).



Trilling's solution to this ideological problem was to create a criticism which would by virtue of its aestheticised moral ideas make such a ideological contamination impossible. That criticism would also envisage a certain kind of politics, one that offers itself as a total view of life from the vantage point of a sensibility schooled in great literature and particularly in the English masters of the realist novel. Such politics of the literary imagination would criticize all other forms of politics in the same way great art is but an implicit critique of the barbarism of the civilization upon which it is predicated. But by trying to resolve the tension between a radicalised liberal consciousness and the imperatives of literary ethics, Trilling, as Joseph Frank famously put it, "actually criticizes politics from the point of view of art - a point of view happily free from the limiting conditions of all political action" (Frank, 1968: 255).

In the end Trilling emerges as a deeply contradictory apologist of the status quo torn between his desire for cultural and moral refinement and his deep-seated fear of radical change. He was never completely at ease with neo-conservatism, which, after his death, tried to enlist him as a precursor and ideological ally, nor was he any more at ease with simplistic liberalism. Instead he chose to become the dissenting voice of liberal thought, which has been a strongly contested ideology criticized even by some of those who continuously championed the ideas put forward in Trilling's work. This work, although critical in many respects, is tied with this ideology in ways that often betray such a degree of pragmatic acceptance – however ingeniously qualified – that the critical element is effectively neutralized. His politics, never stated or explicitly expressed, was of a special kind, not of the kind that leads to action but of the kind that leads to knowledge and the ensuing morally enhancing appreciation that comes as a result of such a knowledge. Yet, ultimately, his unwillingness or inability to take into account the material circumstances upon which such knowledge is predicated leaves his whole critical work extremely vulnerable to the accusation of misguided complicity with the powers that went more than anything else against the main

assumption behind his work: that literature is to be read and valued in as far as it functions as a guide for the effective moral re-evaluation of our lives and the world we live in.

## CONCLUSION

In this concluding part of my study, I wish to discuss the work of the Leavis, Trilling and Sartre in the context of the main argument that lies at the centre of this work, namely that ethical/moral criticism is a way of dealing with issues whose political nature can hardly be concealed. All three critics were directly or indirectly involved in a social interpretation of literature. They all saw the literary phenomenon as essentially a social phenomenon and therefore implicitly or explicitly linked with questions of power. Their choice to consider literature as a social fact – that is as something created, enjoyed and above all legitimized within a well-specified community of people linked together by ties of common culture, religion, language etc. – made them especially sensitive to the sociocultural and ultimately political implications any ‘use’ of literature has. The question then is how and to what extent their work can be seen as an attempt to talk about general, political issues, while using a specialized discourse on the interrelation of literature and morality. In attempting to give an answer to that question I shall concentrate on several issues that were already alluded to in the preceding chapters: the political nature of their critical approach, the ideological assumptions behind their idea of literature and criticism, their own particular brand of commitment and finally the form that their work took in its endeavour to reach its intended audience. I want now to concentrate on the points where these critics either converge or diverge. Not only will this make their respective similarities and differences clearer, but it will also give a wider and more comprehensive view of the ideological configuration of ethics and literary criticism during the time when all three critics were active. Let me start by examining the relation of their work with politics in both a strict and a wider sense.

COMING OF AGE BETWEEN THE WARS: THE NEGOTIATION OF HISTORICAL TENSIONS

The one thing one immediately observes is that all three having been born roughly the same time (Leavis in 1895, Sartre and Trilling in 1905) found themselves coming of age in some of the most turbulent years of the twentieth century. Of the three only Leavis was old enough to have a direct, first-hand experience of the immensely traumatic experience that was World War I. In England Leavis began his career in an environment of political, economic and cultural turmoil. From the first signs of trouble in the British colonies (1919 in India and 1920 in Ireland) to the General Strike of 1926 and then to the troubled economy of the years between 1929 and 1932 as a result of the Great Depression, Leavis matured in an era of social and political upheavals and economic insecurity. This climate of uncertainty that followed immediately after the end of the World War I had an immediate effect on the culture of the time and Cambridge was certainly not unaffected. Leavis was very acutely aware of the cultural changes brought about by the destruction of virtually all pre-1914 certainties. His eager defence of literary modernism in an era when a favourable reaction to it was not taken for granted testifies to his early realization that only a new way of using language could do justice to the new ideological and cultural space that was opening up while the old world deteriorated beyond recognition. His faith in the transformative power of poetry was to be severely tested by World War II and its aftermath. Consequently his turn to the novel may thus be read as indicative of a certain ambivalence as to whether modernist high culture could really bring about any significant changes in a world obviously hostile to this culture's very essence. After World War II there are few historical events that seem to leave an imprint in Leavis's work. I am not in any way suggesting that he did not really engage with the world in the postwar years. My contention is that Leavis's postwar work gives one the impression that he had reached a point quite early in his life when he had concluded on most of the serious issues that would elicit some response from him in the following years. Leavis's work hardly leaves one with the impression that the man behind the often brilliant literary analyses and discussions would be willing to change his view

considerably on any given issue. The Leavis-Snow controversy was one of the rare chances that Leavis had to acknowledge the cultural force of the present-day world and all the ideological mutations and shifts of (cultural) focus that had taken place during the thirty years that separate his first critical interventions and the date (1962) of his violent polemic against C. P. Snow. Unfortunately this chance was missed and for the following fifteen years that Leavis was still active as a critic there had not been one occasion where his work did not give the impression of an obstinate, almost reactionary clinging to his old values and beliefs.

Trilling's case is different. Born ten years later than Leavis, Trilling did not have a first-hand experience of World War I. Although he, like millions of others both in America and the rest of the World, experienced the Great Depression and its devastating effects it is fair to say that Trilling, like Sartre, is predominantly influenced by the post World War II historical events. That is not to say that the increasingly radicalised reaction of the American working classes in the inter-war period and the great appeasing gesture of Roosevelt's New Deal did not register in Trilling's consciousness, but rather that the historical period he most readily responded to in his works is the one that coincides with the Cold War era. Trilling is a critic whose work recaptures its implicit, 'hidden' meanings in the context of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947<sup>107</sup>, the notorious House of Un-American Activities Committee set up by Senator McCarthy, the 1952 victory, and consequently, the almost complete political domination of the Republican Eisenhower<sup>108</sup>, and finally the social, political and cultural turmoil that followed President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. Unlike Leavis, Trilling, even in his late years during the sixties and seventies was in contact with the wider political and ideological currents that marked his country and his era.

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<sup>107</sup> This law, passed by Congress in 1947, curtailed the freedom of industrial action, effectively outlawing strikes by government employees, banning the closed shop and making the unions responsible for breaches of contract. It was one of the many reactions to a balance of power between capitalists and workers that was increasingly believed to be too liberal (some would even go as far as calling it communist!) in its safeguarding of basic worker's rights. For more details see Brogan, 1990: 613.

<sup>108</sup> The eight-year period during which Eisenhower, the first Republican to become President after twenty years in opposition is commonly held to be one of the most conservative in the recent history of the United States. In the words of one historiographer they were the years of "comfortable lethargy" (Brogan, 1990: 631).

Sartre was born the same year as Trilling and although he too was too young to be directly affected by World War I he came of age in the inter-war years witnessing in his own way the often violent political and cultural transitions of inter-war France. I have already said that Sartre did not directly engage with what was going on during that time. That is not to say that the politically charged agitations of February 1934 that brought France on the brink of civil war or the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 did not register in Sartre's consciousness, but rather that these along with the antifascist movement and the bitter class-divisions of urban France were all considered somewhat extraneous to a life primarily devoted to the establishing of a new relation between itself and the world outside. It would take another world war and the experience of captivity in the hands of the Germans for Sartre to realize that this relation is and can only be mediated by history and the common fate of collective entities far beyond the narrow confines of any individual existence. After Sartre escaped from the concentration camp where he was held prisoner and returned to Paris he started to see society in a markedly different way. For the first time society was not merely an abstract conceptualization of collective otherness but a collectivity in motion, on the verge of one of the most exhilarating transformations of its recent history, namely Liberation. Sartre's intense relation with politics began at this point. This close relation would remain strong until his last days. The most important events of this whole period were those that constituted the actual historical context of Sartre's many and varied interventions: the tumultuous years of the short-lived Fourth Republic (1947-1958), and in particular the 1952 arrest of the Communist leader Jacques Duclos – in fact one of the causes of Sartre's controversial *rapprochement* with the PCF; the 1956 intensification of the repressive measures against the FLN in Algeria; the Budapest invasion by Soviet troops, the latter being the cause of Sartre's eventual renunciation of his role as a fellow-traveller of the PCF. Later on there would be the Algerian independence, the Vietnam War and the events of May 1968 all events against which Sartre's

continuing evolution as a critical, oppositional intellectual acquires its true significance and political value.

The fact that Leavis, Trilling, and Sartre all began their careers during a period that is marked by profound changes affecting every aspect of Western culture helps us understand the specificity of their critical, ideological projects. Certain aspects of these projects were discussed in the previous chapters but one crucial aspect was only hinted at. I wish to discuss this particular aspect as a preamble to the more comprehensive examination of the politics of each critic's work which will follow. In order to do that I must begin by setting the general ideological context of the inter-war period, that is, the general framework within which all three critics began to formulate their critical projects.

#### INVENTING AN AUDIENCE: THE NOTIONAL PROJECTION OF A NEW COLLECTIVITY

The main concepts that, in my opinion, one ought to take under consideration are those concepts that are bequeathed by nineteenth-century liberalism, the general ideological formation which came to be severely tested with the outbreak of World War I. Eric Hobsbawm in his magisterial *Age Of Extremes* and particularly in the chapter evocatively entitled "The Fall of Liberalism" argues that

The official theory of liberal bourgeois society did not recognize 'the people' as a set of groups, communities and other collectivities with interests as such, although anthropologists, sociologists and all practicing politicians did. Officially the people, a theoretical concept rather than a real body of human beings, consisted of an assembly of self-contained individuals whose votes added up to arithmetical majorities and minorities, which translated into elected assemblies as majority governments and minority oppositions. (Hobsbawm, 1994: 138).

The implications of this argument are of great importance for my discussion here. If indeed 'the people' – as the supremely important collectivity or, from another point of view,

historical agent – were officially banned only to survive in the social sciences and, I would add, art then in the aftermath of World War I one could not escape the feeling that this collectivity or a variation of it should be reinstated, at least in the collective imaginary, for there to be any chance for social and cultural improvement. The atomization of the people might be an ideological stratagem in favour of the governing classes, but after the orgy of homicidal destruction that was World War I it only exacerbated the intense feelings of social alienation that were felt especially in Europe during the immediate post-war years. In their criticism Leavis, Trilling and in a different way Sartre tried not only to address the new psychological and social realities of the era demarcated by the two World Wars but also to ‘construct’ through their own critical discourse a new form of audience, a new collectivity.

All three critics would address themselves to their audience in such a way as to bring about this fundamental change in its very constitution. No one really addresses himself to the individual, atomized reader<sup>109</sup> and when they do they almost always imply an individual in the beginning of a transformative process, moral in nature, that will eventually return this person to some sort of collectivity. This new collectivity, a notional, but no less real, group of people who share the same fundamental beliefs and interests, is to be understood in moral terms especially when one refers to it in the context of Leavis’s and Trilling’s works. I say moral because in both cases the implied readers of their work are textually constructed through the means of a moral vocabulary, a moral intent and a series of arguments that emphasize the moral aspects of literature and life. This emphasis on and almost exclusive use of morality and ethics produces then a new ideal collectivity, which is not directly or even consciously political but rather a- or pre-political. Yet, as I have tried to establish in these pages, the essential elements of the discursive framework within which these implied collectivities function are political through and through. I wish at this point to see what exactly are the political features of these implied collectivities in the works of Leavis, Trilling and Sartre.

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<sup>109</sup> With the notable exception of Sartre of the *What is Literature?* era. Later on, as I have already argued, Sartre would cease regarding the individual as the regulating concept in his aesthetic and social theory.



As far as Leavis is concerned the collectivity his work assumes and consequently addresses is a conscious and militant minority of lower middle-class origin. It is almost exclusively made up of relatively low-ranking professionals, e.g. school-teachers and more generally people working in the culture and education industries. They are almost exclusively lower middle class and their attitudes towards the upper middle class and its institutions or cultural practices are highly critical, if not openly hostile. This is a minoritarian collectivity which, at its best, functions like a well-disciplined army. Its mode of cultural intervention is the relentless interrogation of everything that threatens the moral purity of the nation to which it belongs. Its great difference from the moralists of older times is that it does not blindly subscribe to a set of antiquated moral rules nor does it wish to impose a certain morality on others. Its avowed intention is the training of a moral intelligence<sup>110</sup> that would allow those who possess it to lead a full, creative life. Most of the times its attitudes and beliefs are markedly anti-capitalist and anti-socialist. The excesses of the capitalist ethos with its destructive emphasis on profit and material progress and the indiscriminately egalitarian ethos of socialism are both rejected and continuously fought against. Whatever is deemed too contaminated by a positivistic attitude, be it a scientific paradigm<sup>111</sup> or the discourse, centred on the economy, of the communist Left, is anathema to them. Its own methodology, empiricist in its epistemological aspect, proceeds by small careful steps where at each point the subject is asked to treat literature as the grandest of all cultural resources and thereby see the world in a way that does justice to the most fundamental moral principles that his own tradition has bequeathed him.

Trilling's implied collectivity, in contradistinction to Leavis', is the dominant middle-class majority. Its core members are those educated enough to be able to appreciate the fine moral distinctions codified in great literature. It may be legitimately said that Trilling's implied

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<sup>110</sup> In its view all intelligence is moral. An immoral intelligence is as far as it is concerned an oxymoron.

<sup>111</sup> The Leavis-Snow controversy perfectly dramatized the incommensurability of the two paradigms: the Leavisean one and the scientific-positivistic one.

collectivity is not as catholic as it appears and that in essence the collective entity that is codified in his works is an elite not very dissimilar from the one notionally projected by Leavis. The ubiquitous 'we' in his texts may be read as connoting not so much the rather abstract collectivity of the American middle class, as the equally class-determined and yet far more concrete collectivity that is roughly coextensive with what we may refer to as the American bourgeois intelligentsia. However, there is a crucial difference. Trilling's audience, as I have argued, was constructed in such a way as to complement and not stand against those in possession of real power. Its various intellectual and cultural interventions were to take place in a social space where a fundamental cultural process had already taken place: the reconciliation of the propertied and the intellectual classes. In this context, the intellectuals – for that was precisely what Trilling projected in his works as a collectivity – could negotiate and potentially secure a permanent place alongside politicians and businessmen in the serious game of real politics. Their aim would not be the oppositional interrogation and intransigent polemics of the Leavisian collectivity, but the constructive criticism and conciliatory attitude of someone utterly complicit with the existing order of things.

As far as Sartre is concerned his ideal collectivity would be incarnated in the organised proletariat, a force totally oppositional to the existing order of things. Although Sartre himself was not entirely immune to the rather typical illusion of the possibility of radical intellectuals spearheading the revolution he gradually accepted that the only legitimate social subject from the point of view of the Marxist Left is the working class and its allies. Yet this realization, as I have argued, came rather late in his career and to some extent coincided with the period following Sartre's effective abandonment of literature. In the period from the late forties to the late fifties Sartre attempted one of the most difficult intellectual tasks that a radical intellectual could undertake. He tried to reconcile the sovereignty of the individual, the trademark of all bourgeois thought, with the collectivist and strictly egalitarian ethos of socialist thought. As a result of this tension, the collectivity implied in his works of the time

was itself marked by the fundamental ambivalence of all petit-bourgeois radicalism. His monumental late works, namely the *Critique* and *The Family Idiot* were extremely important in this respect as they represented two instances of Sartre's great effort to negotiate and articulate a balanced position between a mystificatory idealism of the absolute irreducibility of the individual and a crippling and potentially dangerous – from a political perspective – ultra-collectivism in the Stalinist mould. The flawed Flaubert, who shines in his individuality and yet only makes sense in the multitude of determinations (psychological, familial, social and ultimately historical) that condition every aspect of his existence, is the most apt dramatization of this Sartrean endeavour.

Having looked more closely at the kind of collective social entity each of the critics discussed here attempted to project or establish in the social imaginary I may say that each one represented a different reaction to the main problem of their era, namely the collapse of the old world with its attendant ideology and the dawning of a new one whose points of reference were still fuzzy and underspecified. One thing was certain though, and no thinking person could avoid taking it under serious consideration. That was the great paradox of twentieth-century capitalism, a system which after having plunged the world into two utterly destructive wars and after having almost collapsed as a result of its own continuously aggravated contradictions survived everything and enjoyed an unbroken period of nearly three decades of relative stability and noticeable economic growth. This paradox features as an aspect, often hidden or unexplained, of the historical and more specifically ideological context of the politics of Leavis's, Trilling's and Sartre's criticism. I wish now to look more closely at the specificity of each critic's reaction to this paradox.

#### MORAL DISCOURSE AS A REACTION TO AND AGAINST HISTORY

Leavis, as I have previously suggested, may be considered as a pre-political critic in the sense that his critical practice attempted to establish a notional space where the critic and his

like-minded reader(s) could meet in a fundamental agreement over the most basic and serious issues of life. Leavis was not interested in the actual politics one reads about in the daily press, nor in politics in the wider sense of a system of values which underlies the precise way people choose to live together in the communities they form. Leavis's own concern was with what lay beneath these passing configurations of common human endeavour. He was interested in the cultural and moral foundations that were deemed necessary for any life that claims to have meaning and purpose. In his own peculiar way then Leavis was 'anti-political' in that, in his work at least, he consistently avoided to face up to the task of providing a clear answer regarding the problems that his society was facing. Leavis had very little, if anything, to say about unemployment, labour disputes, foreign and domestic policy decisions and any other issues that can be called political. He did speak about urban alienation, mass literacy – or mass illiteracy as he would no doubt put it – the leisure industry and other issues, some of them of a somewhat topical importance, but his intention was never to discuss them in their political dimensions, but only as areas where the symptoms of cultural decline were most evident. Leavis treated all problems as essentially cultural problems, all of them symptoms of the steady decay of traditional culture, a decay which he saw reflected in a use of language that alienated people from the best resources of their own tradition. If there is any point in calling Leavis's work political it certainly is not because he intended it to be political or because, with some marked exceptions, there is anything identifiable as political in the work itself, but because his work ultimately deals with issues of great political importance in a manner contrary to its own avowed intentions. Leavis's proposals about 'English' as the academic centre around which all else must revolve if there were to be any chance of preserving what was worthy of safeguarding in the English tradition is a case in point. So was his conception of the role of the 'enlightened minority' in the dissemination of cultural knowledge. Leavis's own peculiar brand of cultural politics, that one may designate as a sort of inverted cultural Bolshevism, was as political as any of the statements of the Marxists of

the thirties against which he was so often arguing in *Scrutiny*. However, the peculiarity of his work is that its political character lies precisely in the distance he put between himself and politics. This distance is exemplified by the use of a critical method that sustains its discursive force by the use of a series of mainly moral concepts that attempt to change the course of things very much in the interventional manner a political argument does. I have already discussed the role moral concepts play in Leavis's own individual mix of conservative empiricism and post-romantic idealism. What I wish to do here is to emphasise the instrumental role such a moral conception of the literary phenomenon plays in the suppression and eventual disappearance of the political.

Morality is, in its given and widely accepted forms, a social phenomenon, a set of regulative ideas and ideals shared by the majority of those living in any kind of human community. Yet unlike politics, with which it shares a great deal, morality seldom deals with questions of political and economic power. Therefore, it is ill-equipped to constitute the centre of a critical methodology which strives to explain and contribute to the transformation of the existing order of things. Moral concepts work best when they regulate the lives of individuals or, as Leavis would have it, the lives of the members of close-knit, 'organic' communities. Yet the problems, which Leavis's criticism attempted to explain and ultimately solve, needed to be considered with a different set of concepts than the ones he habitually used. By refusing or being unable to incorporate in his own thinking a critical methodology of materialist provenance, Leavis was destined to repeat the same mistake over and over, namely pursuing his quixotic attempts at effecting real change in the world while at the same time refusing to account for any of the material preconditions of the state of affairs, which he found so unbearable. In other words Leavis wished for grand-scale cultural and ideological changes while shying away from employing any critical tools that might realistically bring about such changes.

Leavis's relation with politics is marred by a series of misconceptions about the extent to which cultural politics can successfully bring about results that transcend the rather narrow confines of academia or any other institutions whose function is the guardianship of 'high culture'. Trilling, while his ideological presuppositions were not that dissimilar to Leavis's, was more comfortable with politics and far more ingenious in using his criticism for overtly political ends. Yet, he, like Leavis, pursued his ends by employing a moral vocabulary in his criticism in his attempt to articulate a new ideological platform for the American middle-classes, not by political argument, but by making an appeal to a series of moral truths, that, he asserted, were put forward as ideals by literature and more particularly by the classic realist novel. Trilling's relation with politics was more complicated than Leavis's. While the latter made abundantly clear that, in his worldview, issues related with cultural continuity and moral earnestness took precedence over any other issues that might relate to the more mundane, material aspects of life, Trilling never became convinced about the absolute supremacy of culture over all other aspects of human life. His work was therefore more sensitive to the political and ideological nuances of the issues he considered, his style perfectly complementing this ambivalence between the cultural and political that marked particularly his early work. Leavis was a lower-middle class radical idealist waging war against both the forces of technologico-benthamite vulgarity, as he metonymically referred to capitalism, and the Marxists whom he was inclined to consider more complicit with the system rather than potential tactical allies of his. Trilling, on the other hand, although he too was of a lower-middle class background negotiated his class disadvantage in a markedly different way than Leavis. While the latter effectively displaced all class issues by elaborating and expounding on the old aristocratic concept of 'enlightened minority' Trilling, at least in his more optimistic early period, had considerably more faith in the power of the liberal middle-classes to renounce their residual radicalism and thus elevate themselves to a position where they could exert the ideological hegemony of their new, aesthetically informed and

morally enhanced worldview. Leavis, faced with a whole different set of problems in Britain, promoted the solution of elevating a small number of gifted individuals of his class to a position of authority in his desire to enable them (himself included) to share some of the power that was until then the monopoly of the upper classes. Leavis knew all too well that the rigid class-system of Britain would not allow his class to participate in the kind of decision-making processes which are a mark of real power. Therefore, his many interventions can be interpreted as tactical manoeuvres aiming at a re-allocation of power which would enable the English petty-bourgeoisie or at least the most gifted part of it to claim cultural and, indirectly, even political authority. Trilling on his part faced a completely different set of problems. The class-structure of the American society was far looser and consequently a greater class mobility with its attendant advantages for those who made the transition was more evident there.

Another consequence of this fundamental difference was that elitist institutions in America were fewer and far less powerful than British ones. Also, the culture of these institutions was less conditioned by the ideological rigidities of places like Cambridge or Oxford in Britain. Leavis, amazingly enough given his reputation and influence, was never wholeheartedly accepted by Cambridge and his antipathy towards all established cultural institutions is well-documented. Trilling, on the other hand, had no problem starting a career at Columbia University and climbing up the professional ladder to the highest positions, eventually ending up as one of the most respected and well-known intellectuals in America. This cultural difference partly explains why their attitudes towards institutional matters were so markedly different. Whereas Leavis wished to subvert the established system of education and cultural policy and substitute it with his highly idealized notion of the English Department as the centre of the new cultural order Trilling had no qualms in allowing himself being totally incorporated into the university and publishing his work from a position of established authority as a professor in one of the most respected American universities.

Both were using ethics as an alternative to other more politicized versions of criticism but due to the aforementioned differences Leavis's moral-critical vocabulary acquired a rigid, polemical tone whereas Trilling's was characterized by a suppleness and ambiguity more typical of someone quite at ease with his position in the status quo.

There is of course another difference in their critical vocabularies, one not of tone but of substance. Leavis's concepts are put forward as antithetical to the values endorsed by a state increasingly driven by market-forces, forces which although never conceptualized as such were very much the object of Leavis's severe criticism throughout his career. Other values, such as those promoted by a gradually evolving welfare state with its emphasis on the democratisation of rights – particularly the broadening of access to tertiary education – also met with Leavis's increasingly reactionary skepticism. Trilling, on the other hand, never intended to promote any set of values or a specific ideology contrary to the established one(s). His aim was not to fight the status quo, but to cleanse it from its ideological impurities. His intention was the elevation of the cultural status of the middle-classes which in America were more in danger of sinking into the passive inertia of consumerism than being marginalized in terms of political power. Trilling shared with Matthew Arnold the concern over the apparent incapability of the middle class of complementing its economic hegemony with a level of culture that would safeguard its ideological hegemony as well. Therefore, his often elevated style, which carefully avoids the high-pitched and overtly polemical tones of Leavis, reflects the main purpose of his critical texts, namely to establish a base upon which a discussion of several key moral, aesthetic and generally cultural issues could effectively take place.

Both Leavis and Trilling were pedagogues. Both aimed to educate their students and by implication the class that the majority of their students came from in a way of thinking that emphasises the essentially moral aspects of the relation between man and the world. Both, by virtue of their class-position and their initial ideological choices, used moral concepts in their



cultural interventions. For the same reasons both wished to restore literature to its older hegemonic position among the arts and both identified literature as a diachronic index of all the cultural values worth preserving. In many ways, they both epitomized the idealistic rear-guard reaction of a growing number of people of middle-class origin in their respective countries against the twin dangers of commercialization and working-class radicalism. This double threat – one from the ‘right’, that is the commodification of cultural artefacts and the commercialization of culture in general, and the other from the ‘left’, that is the increasingly aggressive radicalism of an organized working-class and its political institutions – provoked a strong reaction in every field from those members of the middle class who felt most threatened by it. Leavis’s and Trilling’s criticism is only an aspect of that reaction.

There is hardly a better way of achieving a kind of *mise-en-relief* of the specific ideological qualities of such a criticism than by examining a wholly different kind of criticism from another national and intellectual tradition. Sartre’s criticism is precisely such a case. Informed by philosophy rather than literature and indebted to ideological traditions quite alien to the Anglo-American tradition of critical thought Sartre produced a number of texts that explored the relation between ethics, literature and politics in a manner markedly different to the one employed by the critics discussed above. Sartre’s politics, and by extension the political content of his work, is also very different from Leavis’s conservative ‘anti-politics’ and Trilling’s centrist conservatism.

Sartre shares with the aforementioned critics the same class-origin. Born into a middle-class family it took him until World War II to ‘discover’ that history was not a mere accident that one has to grudgingly come to terms with but the inescapable context within which human life is made intelligible. As soon as Sartre became a historically-conscious philosopher his new-found faith in the possibilities of man as a social and political animal were made apparent in his critical work. From that point on, roughly from the early forties to the last days of his life, one can witness a constant ideological struggle and process of

transformation, both of which left their traces in Sartre's output during all those years. Such a radical transformation is nowhere to be found in Leavis or Trilling. Leavis may have suffered immensely during World War I and that had, as we know from his biographers<sup>112</sup>, an immediate effect on his early professional and ideological choices but from then on he remained more or less recognisably the same throughout his long career. Trilling's trajectory is also marked by an ideological consistency from the early years till the end. This fact is not merely a biographical curiosity but a crucial factor in identifying the specific ideological qualities of Sartre's intellectual trajectory from a radical form of phenomenology to the embracing of core Marxist principles and later on to the rejection of Marxism and the opening up, in his later years, to new ideological and philosophical configurations. I believe that the dynamic character of Sartre's political thought through the years, the dynamism of its successive transformations and the endless questions that it posed indicate a fundamental difference not only of character, but also of a way of seeing the world and understanding the relation of oneself with others. This wholly different interpretive framework makes use of the fundamental concept of change, which in its most radical aspects considers revolution as a legitimate way of moving things forward. Here we are very far away indeed from the conservative politics of Leavis and Trilling.

Sartre's critical texts are a testimony to his intellectual dynamism and adaptability and are marked by the radical orientation of his thought. This is another feature of his that sets him apart from both Leavis and Trilling. Sartre, in contradistinction to the aforementioned critics, turned his experience during World War II into the affective foundation for a new philosophy that would not simply reject the new in favour of a largely imaginary tradition, as was the case with Leavis. Nor would he ally himself with the privileged middle-class in the pursuit of a totally misconceived moral and cultural excellence, as was the case with Trilling. Sartre's orientation towards radical socialism meant that, despite his occasionally

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<sup>112</sup> The most vivid account can be found in Ian MacKillop's *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, pp. 38-47.

controversial choices, his main concern was the promotion of the ideals of that tradition: essential equality, personal and social emancipation from all forms of oppression and finally, and perhaps most controversially, the pursuit of freedom as the supreme goal of humankind. This last ideal is indeed controversial as, in the context of any Marxist or even *marxisant* theory, freedom needs to be strongly contextualized and eventually qualified in order to be useful as a radical concept. In the absence of such re-working this concept's long history and semantic wealth within the liberal tradition will most certainly cast a long shadow over any of its new attempted uses. Sartre's uses of freedom were certainly not indebted to the Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition but to different conditions, namely those of Romanticism, Cartesianism and phenomenology. As a result of this overdetermination of his conception of freedom a certain tension in his work appears whenever this 'freedom' is made to co-exist with and even complement other concepts such as class, class-consciousness and more specifically the relation between subject and history in the context of a radical transformation of society.

Sartre was a philosopher very much inclined to adopt an absolutist stance towards his concepts and methodologies, something that had as a result a certain conceptual inflexibility in his philosophical arguments. Nowhere is that more pronounced than in the case of 'freedom' from its early appearance in *Being and Nothingness* to its later adventures in the dialectic put forward in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The trajectory of that crucial, and as I interpret it, mainly moral concept is what makes Sartre's political thought so interesting and so ambivalent in some crucial points. One of these points is the relation of the subject with the world that surrounds it, and more specifically and closer to my interests here, the relation of a special, historically determined kind of subject, the man of letters or intellectual, to the world as he perceives it. Both Leavis and Trilling were quite explicit in their belief that the intellectual in his guise as a literary critic is the one social agent best qualified to wage a war against vulgar materialism, moral insipidness, or radical over-simplifications. Sartre, on his

part, never shared this idealistic conception of the intellectual as a moral, cultural crusader. Yet in his texts that were later to be collected in *What is Literature?* there is a rather vague suggestion that the committed writer, in his revolutionary voluntaristic fervour, may if not exactly substitute organized political action, then at least lead it implicitly by virtue of his sheer self-confidence in his own purpose. That, of course, may be seen as a typical petty-bourgeois illusion, an inverted view of the world and the necessities of socialist politics. Yet Sartre, it has to be said, was perceptive enough to move gradually away from the idealistic conception of the intellectual(s) spearheading a socialist revolution to a more nuanced and politically informed conception of the intellectual, at least the non-aligned leftist intellectual, as someone who willingly abdicates the powers that accompany his position in the existing order of things in order to put himself in the service of radical working-class politics<sup>113</sup>. Sartre was one of the very few intellectuals who actually did attempt to put this into practice. If he never quite succeeded it was because, as he knew too well, the passage from a petty-bourgeois mode of existence, which is the mode of life of a typical intellectual, to an entirely different mode of existence, in accordance with the exigencies of revolutionary struggle is far more difficult than it first appears. But the fact that he did reach a point where he conceived of the intellectual as an (often vital) accessory to the struggle of emancipation in co-operation with others and not in position of (an imaginary) authority testifies to his intellectual honesty and his gradual moving away from the romantic revolutionism of his earlier days. Sartre's eventual conclusion that the intellectual is, by virtue of his acquired status as an effective technician of knowledge, complicit to the general condition of unequal distribution of power, offers a formidable refutation of the idealistic and inherently reactionary ideological schemas of both Leavis and Trilling.

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<sup>113</sup> The texts that best articulate this new conception of what an intellectual is are "A Plea for Intellectuals" and "A Friend of the People" both in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, pp. 227-298.

THE OUTSIDER, THE MAN OF THE SYSTEM AND THE VOICE OF DISSENT: DIFFERENT  
CONCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL

The place and the function of the intellectual faced with a rapidly changing world is, to my opinion, one of the most important point that must be made when one examines Sartre's theory in relation to the critical theories of Leavis and Trilling. The political value of those theories lies in the precise nature of the ideological end in the service of which such texts argue or attempt to persuade their audience, and the way in which this end is to be achieved. In both these levels the politics of Sartre's criticism offers an alternative view and method to the questions of cultural intervention, the extent to which such interventions can achieve their intended goals and, most importantly, the nature of the goals themselves. Sartre's alliance with the Left, despite its ups and downs, showed in a painfully clear manner the limits of any intellectual intervention when the intended goal is the unconditional emancipation of the oppressed. Sartre's work showed that at a certain point the very nature of intellectual or cultural intervention risks reproducing the very conditions of inequality it sought to efface in the first place. It is interesting to note that no such realization ever appears in the works of either Leavis or Trilling, as neither of them ever really doubted the supreme regulatory powers that the intellectual, and particularly the literary critic, ought to have.

Intimately connected with this is the question of the nature of the end of the critical endeavour, that is the question for whom and for what precisely one writes. All three critics discussed here have been very clear regarding those issues. Leavis explicitly put his criticism in the service of an enlightened minority which by virtue of its moral-literary excellence could and should lead the way towards a future when the life of a whole society, especially its intellectual, cultural aspect, would be regulated and supervised in accordance with the moral standards laid down by Tradition, as this is codified in the established canon of a national literature. Trilling was equally explicit in his alliance with the liberal middle-class, which he

believed should educate itself in the fine moral virtues that only a literary sensitivity can offer and therefore deservedly claim a hegemonic status in American culture. Leavis substituted an aristocratic minority for class and by side-stepping the whole class-question altogether he could easily concentrate on a moral polemic against the system, the deepest structural features of which he unknowingly supported. Trilling, on the other hand, very consciously supported the class structure of American society, his purpose being to influence a certain segment of the middle-class so that it should renounce the radical tendencies that it had. His deepest wish was that this class would align itself with the ideology of the status quo – very much in the material interests of this class – which should then strive to influence not from the outside, as it were, in the aggressive and intransigent manner of Leavis but from the inside.

Sartre in contradistinction to the other two chose to align politically with the working classes and the emancipatory project of their most radical members. It is this fundamental choice that partly explains why he never quite managed to formulate an ethics that would do justice to his occasionally conflicting ideologies of radical individual freedom on the one hand, and radical human emancipation on the other. In his critical texts the tension between a politics and an ethics of radical emancipation is apparent, as is the fact that only through a thorough and constant re-thinking of the relation between the two can there be a hope of finally reconciling the often conflicting demands of the moral law and radical politics. Sartre may have failed in finally re-uniting the two in perfect harmony, but only because the task was so impossibly difficult. What he did succeed in doing though is that he showed the limits of the political efficacy of a moral vocabulary and also the impasses a critic comes up against while using it in the context of a radical socialist project.

Leavis's and Trilling's moral concepts are against or, one could argue, outside politics, they acknowledge the social provenance of all morality but they refuse to allow for the class-determinations that condition its particular applications. Sartre's moral concepts, on the

other hand, such as 'freedom' and 'commitment' bear within themselves at least in their particular uses in his work the opening up to the concrete, historical situation that contains them. In the course of Sartre's life and particularly from the fifties onwards they would eventually become moral-political concepts following the realization that questions of inequality due to class and race must be urgently dealt with.

The possibility of such a mutation of moral concepts into political or moral-political ones is at the very centre of my argument here which seeks to show that a moral discourse is at one and the same time a negation and an implicit unconscious affirmation of politics. As a negation of politics it functions by ignoring the collective character of the historical subject. A moral discourse implicitly or explicitly refers to an 'I', an individual entity faced with other individual entities. In contrast politics refers to a 'we', a collective entity interacting with other collective entities in terms of either co-operation or antagonism. This unavoidably leads to the question of power, which is by far the one feature that sets ethics and politics apart. A moral problematic ignores power, or when it acknowledges it, it does so in a way that regards it more as a vice than as a structural feature of the system. Leavis's staunch refusal to acknowledge the structural, material causes for capitalism's various malfunctions is an example of this idealistic tendency to regard a cultural crusade as superior to political struggle, while at the same time considering the latter as too vulgar or ineffective compared with the former. Politics, on the other hand, at least in its most radical forms can only acknowledge that all human relations take place in determinate conditions of power, conditions which are not only independent of man's wishes, but also quite unaffected, except only marginally, by his moral laws or systems. As a result of this realization, a political interpretation of a given situation will take under consideration the unequal distribution of power and of material and cultural resources, a fine example of which is the luxury some men can afford in order to make fine, informed moral judgements without having to deal with hunger or persecution. It is this realization that marks Sartre's work, from a certain time

onwards at least, and which is so conspicuously absent from Leavis and Trilling. Trilling in particular, being solely concerned with bourgeois values, could not even begin to understand, let alone articulate, the fact that other less privileged classes ought to have been discussed in terms radically different from the ones he used in his criticism. His refusal to acknowledge the multivalent specificity of the working-class, this fearsome 'other' of the American (and any other) middle-class was a strategic move of singular importance. Without it he would risk re-introducing a potentially dangerous political aspect of the class-situation in his critical discourse. By concentrating solely on the middle-class and its values Trilling could trick his readers into believing that the American working class either does not exist or, if it does, that it is of no particular importance. As a consequence, in his notional universe, where only members of the middle-class are of any consequence, politics itself is transformed into morality, manners and the pursuit of an intellectually refined life. It is very illuminating to see how Sartre dealt with the relation between his criticism and the class-situation of France whilst Trilling was assuming Matthew Arnold's role in America.

Sartre not only saw the bitter class-divisions of the immediate post-war French society but he committed himself in a way quite antithetical to Trilling's. His ideological position of the late thirties and early forties gradually gave way, as a result of his political affiliation with the Left, to a more politically-informed series of arguments that sought to assert the necessity of an emancipatory radical politics of class and race, and the need to establish a comprehensive ethical theory that will legitimize such a politics. Power was always at the centre of Sartre's thought and consequently so was inequality, injustice and the need to abolish them. It must be emphasized at this point that power, either in its agent-centered form or in its decentred aspects, as seen for example from a poststructuralist perspective, is, to all intents and purposes, absent from all critical thought that seeks to interpret social and cultural phenomena from a moral viewpoint.



Closely linked to the question of power and politics is the question of the critic's alignment with a particular cause, in other words his political commitment. All three critics discussed here were undoubtedly committed critics in the general sense that they all willingly served a specific ideology and either implicitly (as is the case with Leavis and Trilling) or explicitly (as is the case with Sartre), as I have been arguing in this study, a specific politics. The differences among them are to be found in the way each has conceived of, and consequently expressed, his commitment.

Leavis, whose commitment to the causes he deemed as worth pursuing can hardly be disputed, is the most remarkable case here as his dedication to his critical-cultural ideals seems strange considering his aversion to politics and his deep mistrust of any radical act which he considered as mere posturing. I say strange because I think that such dedication is usually, although by no means exclusively, related to a more pronounced, radical politics of either extreme of the political spectrum. Yet Leavis was ideologically indebted to neither of these extremes and therefore his intransigent polemicism must be accounted for not in terms of the actual political views he did or did not hold, but rather in terms of his unwillingness to engage in a thorough and systematic political interpretation of literature and culture. By this I mean that the tenor of Leavis's commitment is linked to the effacement of politics from his thought, to the narrowing of his own interpretive framework and his eventual inability, especially in the last two decades of his life to comprehend the cultural, ideological and generally political changes of British society in a way that would lead to a constructive critique of it. Leavis got trapped despite himself inside an interpretive system which offered no resources that would enable him to account for the seismic changes during his time in a way other than viewing them as a constant fall from an imaginary state of grace. He was too idealist, too convinced that ideas are utterly autonomous in society and therefore incapable of finding a plausible explanation as to why things did not in fact change in accordance with the

demands of the most finely-argued and totally convincing moral ideas. Left only with ideas such as the necessity of a coherent moral centre knowable through the canon of English literature, a centre around which all other activities ought eventually to take their place and assume their form, Leavis was finally proven unable to account for the political character of the changes he witnessed. As a consequence of this he grew increasingly bitter and his tone and the content of his work became increasingly reactionary as, for instance, his negative views on the widening of access to tertiary education (based solely on the argument that academic-moral excellence cannot be 'democratized') demonstrate. Leavis's commitment then is one which is in fact animated by the very conditions of its political naivety and practical ineffectiveness. Its strength comes from the sheer ideological rigidity of the moral concepts it uses and also from the fact that these concepts unlike political ones never really engage dialectically with reality; they just accept it or reject it, they either fight it to the end or give up the fight altogether. Leavis fought his own battles to the end with a dedication and passion that command respect and even a certain degree of admiration. Yet at the end one cannot but come to the conclusion that his considerable gifts could be put to a better use if only he had chosen not to completely abolish politics from his critical system.

If Leavis's commitment was the commitment of a radical idealist who worked in the margins of the system then Trilling's was the commitment of a pragmatist who worked within the system trying to effect changes in a way that he thought was congenial to the system itself. It may seem a bit odd to talk about commitment in the case of Trilling, as his criticism makes a rather strong case against any form of strong ideological alignment that can be properly regarded as commitment. Yet there is something in Trilling's work, a series of interconnected concepts loosely grouped around the master-concept of 'liberal imagination' that testify to a deliberate ideological choice. This choice, as I have already argued, was to work through the contradictory elements of liberal thought with the avowed aim of cleansing it from the ideological impurities of its radical past. As a bourgeois ideologue and a respected

professor of an Ivy-League institution, Trilling was committed in a manner markedly different from the way Leavis and Sartre were. His commitment was one of the great man of letters, a commitment to abstract ideas and moral principles far removed from the actual reality of the majority of people. Trilling was what we could call in Gramsci's terms a 'traditional intellectual', that is, someone whose socio-political function as an intellectual is in the ideological and ultimately political interest of the existing order. As a critic and intellectual figure Trilling was very much the epitome of the systemic, thoroughly co-opted intellectual. As such his critical function may be described as a top-down cultural process, where the main ideas expressed by the critical work get disseminated through the mobilization of the vast resources of the system the work ideologically supports in the first place.<sup>114</sup> In addition to that, Trilling was also a distinctly non-polemical individual, his preferred method being a complex series of arguments in a quasi-literary prose that often seemed to imply rather than state. For all these reasons Trilling's commitment is so much different in both tone and political content to Leavis's.

It was also totally antithetical to what Sartre had in mind when he first introduced the term in the mid-forties. Sartre, as we remember, gave commitment a strictly defined moral and political context. Sartrean commitment is the fundamental choice an intellectual makes when he realizes that 'right' and 'good' are to be found in the demands and aspirations of the oppressed. It is also the taking sides with the working classes and more generally with all those who suffer under any form of oppression. In a way then Trilling, strangely enough, may be seen as a committed intellectual of sorts as his critical work directs itself towards an identifiable social class and deals with issues that are intimately related to the real material and cultural interests of this class. It is Leavis, in this context at least, that seems the one most remote from the Sartrean notion of commitment as his intended audience, although almost exclusively lower middle-class, is hardly ever, in his work, addressed as a social class

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<sup>114</sup> In order to put that in perspective it is worth reminding that Leavis had to pay from his own money in order to publish *Scrutiny* at a time when he did not even have a permanent teaching post at Cambridge.

with a specific politics<sup>115</sup>. In other words, the implied reader of Leavis's work is an imaginary social entity. It is imaginary, because it does not correspond to either a social class or to any other empirically verifiable social entity. This entity is very much a figment of Leavis idealistic imagination.

Sartre's case is equally complex. His politics clearly directed his work against the bourgeoisie but his philosophy with its residual subjectivism and idealism made him posit as his ideal reader an entity quite unlike the collectivities that inspired circa 1945 his own spectacular turn to history. Sartre's early idea of a writer and a reader bound together in a relation of unconditional reciprocity was more of an axiological proposition than a realistic assessment of the actual 'political economy' of the production and consumption of literature. These two notional figures of Sartre's early literary theory, the writer who publishes his work as a gesture of human generosity and the reader who is, by virtue of this generosity, morally compelled to reciprocate in his reading, are both idealistic abstractions. In reality they are engaged in a process far more complex than Sartre's initial conception allowed for. There is a reason for that idealistic lapse in Sartre and that is his desire to preserve the sovereignty of the concept of absolute human freedom in his work. When he came to the realization that human freedom is severely qualified by its mere facticity he abandoned any attempt to give the sovereign individual consciousness any conceptual supremacy. The more intimate Sartre became with Marxism, the more he acknowledged the class-determinations of all the agents, individual or collective involved in the production and consumption of literature. His commitment, at least in its conceptual content changed accordingly. The early Sartre shared with both Leavis and Trilling the belief that literature and critical work can indeed make a difference in the sphere of politics in general. In the following decades Sartre became more

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<sup>115</sup> This is true only if one considers, as I do here, 'class' to signify collectivities in relation to the mode of (material) production, where one of the key distinguishing characteristics is material capital. If, however, one considers 'class' in relation not only to material production but to knowledge and information as well, then it is possible to argue that the cultural form of this new capital, whose political economy Leavis tried to sketch, makes my argument regarding the class-status of Leavis's audience open to a series of objections. A very good account of these and related issues is to be found in Frow (1995).

ambivalent as to the extent to which a purely cultural intervention could effect any substantial changes. From the sixties onwards Sartre had almost completely given up on literature as an effective form of cultural politics. In a sense, his last great critical work on Flaubert was done as a token of a realistic acceptance of the fact that he, *qua* intellectual, could not but do what he had been training all his life for, namely intellectual work.

This is a very different conception and ethos of commitment through intellectual work from what one sees in Leavis and also in Trilling. None of the last two ever turned their critical eyes to their own methods in a self-reflexive manner. Having both, each in his own way, placed themselves outside or against politics they did not feel the need to carefully re-examine the very nature of their critical and cultural endeavour. Leavis kept fighting a losing battle placing himself in such a way as to make the possibilities of winning very slight indeed. Trilling never really fought a battle, at least not in the way Leavis and Sartre did, and when he did come face to face with the strange reality of the rebellious sixties and the resulting profound changes in every aspect of American society he withdrew into an even more conservative attitude.<sup>116</sup>

#### WAYS OF SPEAKING: THE DIALECTICS OF FORM AND INSTITUTIONAL STATUS

Another aspect of the aforementioned critics' work and one related to the tenor of their ideological commitment is the form their work took in its attempt to reach its audience. In this respect, all three have one thing in common: they all wrote their critical texts in a language that was essentially accessible to the educated layman. Their use of critical language was such that carefully avoided the use of esoteric terminology, which was to become one of the most controversial features of later literary theory. They all used their own terminology, but even Sartre, who was certainly not hostile to the idea of using a most specialized

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<sup>116</sup> It is certainly no coincidence that the one cultural issue where his increasingly conservative attitude was made apparent was, as was the case with Leavis and which I referred to earlier on, the question of widening access to tertiary education. In Trilling's case it was the question of quotas for women and ethnic groups that offended his sensibilities.

terminology when he saw the need for it (e.g. the philosophical jargon of the *Critique*), adopted, at least in the texts that interest me here, an accessible critical idiom. There is of course the question of whether common words do actually become quasi-technical terms when used within the context of a specific work. One may wonder whether Leavis's terms constitute a specific terminology which, in essence, is not unlike any other contemporary, highly specialized terminology. My opinion is that this is not the case. All the texts that I have discussed in this study make their point by using certain concepts that are conveyed by terms that are part of the general vocabulary and whose specific semantic charge does not in any way forbid them from entering the public discourse. When Leavis speaks of 'organic community', 'tradition', 'vitality', 'moral seriousness' etc. he uses words that are, by virtue of their commonness, understandable by the vast majority of educated readers. One does not have to know in advance the specific meaning of a term in order to be able to make sense of the critical work, instead one gets all the information needed from the context in which the word is used. The same holds true for Trilling's work. His critical arguments are structured around a cluster of concepts such as 'human variousness', 'moral imagination' etc. that are conveyed by words very much part of a shared vocabulary. As is the case with Leavis's work, Trilling's is accessible to anyone who is willing to read it attentively without the need to have already mastered a specific terminology. All that is needed is some level of education and the ability to process new information. As I already pointed out even Sartre, who in his philosophical works can easily scare off a potential reader by the apparent impenetrability of the vocabulary used, in his critical works, avoided any terminology that might have put the text's intelligibility at risk.

The reason for that is, I believe, quite simple. Sartre, Leavis, and Trilling, all wanted to reach a general audience; that was the implicit ideological and political imperative of their critical project. They all wanted, each in his own way, to educate a large audience that would eventually disseminate their ideas even further. They all wished that eventually real cultural or

political changes would come about as a result of their cultural intervention. They all shared the conviction that literature and criticism could at some point and under favourable conditions effect a real change. They differed in the way they conceived the nature and limits of that change, but hardly ever disputed its feasibility. Leavis have wished for a series of profound changes despite the fact that his formidable energies were eventually spent on a series of fiercely executed cultural interventions of limited scope. Trilling may have not wished for a large-scale change in the way the system worked but was nevertheless concerned about the possible aesthetic-moral transformation of outlook in his large audience. Sartre was, as we have seen, very much committed to a radical political transformation early on in his career and although he may have had second thoughts about the potential of a purely literary, cultural intervention he never doubted the necessity of a big change that could and should come about, hopefully partly inspired by his ideas.

This common feature of all three theorists under discussion here is important to the extent that it underlines the big differences of their era with ours. Theirs was one that could afford such a committed faith in the practical, political power of the word. It was an era less inclined to preclude the possibility of addressing a wider audience. What is more, the fact that all three could, as intellectual figures, find a wide audience testifies to the specificity of their respective cultures and their own unique personalities, both factors that made it possible for them to wage their intellectual and cultural wars the way they did. One of these specificities crucial for what I am trying to argue here has already been discussed when I examined the particular modality of their discourse in relation to the audience they addressed. Yet, there is one more thing that must be brought to attention, and, I believe, this is the fact that the careers of all three show varying degrees of dependence on an institutional framework.

Trilling was the most 'domesticated' of all three, almost totally at ease in his capacity as a hardly controversial member of an elite institution. Leavis, on the other hand, was from the

outset an outsider, an intellectual figure marginalised because of his personality, his ideas and, more specifically, his hostility towards the academic ethos that he saw as prevalent in Cambridge during his life. Leavis brought with him a petty-bourgeois militancy very much a product of his intellectual and cultural heritage of liberal Protestantism, which did not go down very well with the Cambridge establishment. Yet, it was the historical conjuncture of the late twenties that provided this latent possibility of a certainly not very far-reaching 'class struggle', a possibility which Leavis seized immediately. Trilling also was an outsider, a young intellectual of Jewish origin, left-wing sympathies, and a keen interest in Freudian psychoanalysis; all features that nearly excluded him from American academia during the thirties. However, the American metropolitan culture of the thirties, was pregnant with certain possibilities, one of which being the ability of someone like Trilling to get a teaching post at Columbia. Trilling, like so many others, seized the opportunity although later in his work there is hardly any reference to the traumatic experience of cultural and ideological domestication that must surely have been felt during those early years in his life. Trilling never really made much of his cultural difference in contradistinction to Leavis who never tired of reminding his readers of how profoundly ill-received he was at Cambridge.

Sartre, on the other hand, is a special case that can only make sense in the particular context of mid-century French culture. Unlike the other two critics, he was never an academic. His only teaching position was as a high-school teacher for some years during the mid to late thirties. Sartre was a freelance writer and his philosophical and critical work was written, published and discussed outside the established academic world. It is true that Sartre had the mighty *Éditions Gallimard* behind him and later in his life his enormous fame afforded him possibilities that were virtually undreamed of by other intellectuals of his time. Sartre functioned outside established institutions, like academia, enjoying a level of autonomy which is evidenced not only in the multifariousness of his output but also in the very nature of his purely theoretical work. I have already discussed the fact that a great deal of Sartre's



theoretical texts, such as his first take on a philosophical formulation of ethics, only survived in a fragmentary form. From his two major philosophical texts only *Being and Nothingness* may be considered in some way (although not entirely) completed.<sup>117</sup> This perpetual incompleteness that characterizes Sartre's output from the beginning to the end is hardly something one would expect from a practising academic's work. Sartre's distance from the elite institutions of French tertiary education<sup>118</sup> is one among the things that account for the specificity of his work. This distance meant that Sartre was able to publish without the constraints usually imposed on academics. It also meant that unlike both Leavis and Trilling he could publish without taking into account the micro-politics of the academic departments and universities. Leavis had to always negotiate the uneasy relation between his precarious position in Cambridge and the public expression of his own ideas. Trilling also produced his work within the limits imposed on him by Columbia. Sartre, on the other hand did not have to consider any of that, nor did he have to adhere to the rules and norms that occasionally hamper instead of promoting intellectual creativity. What Sartre had to negotiate was an enormous (at least for an intellectual) popularity, an early acquired 'celebrity-status' that often led him to address issues and tackle subjects far wider than those almost any other institutionally-bound intellectual would easily consider addressing. Consequently Sartre's output does not exhibit the apparent continuity of themes and methodologies that Leavis's and Trilling's output does. It is a work far more variegated than theirs, a work that responds too directly to the questions posed by the history of its time to be as smooth and thematically consistent as the work of a university professor. Sartre's openness and willingness to engage with the pressing political questions of his time meant that his work, in some respect, follows

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<sup>117</sup> Its follow-up which would be Sartre's first attempt in formulating a moral philosophy never materialized. His *Notebooks for an Ethics* is what remained of this failed first attempt.

<sup>118</sup> It must be reminded however that Sartre was a graduate of the École Normale Supérieure one of the *Grandes Écoles* and a breeding ground of the French intelligentsia in the twentieth century. So this distance that I am alluding to ought not be considered in absolute terms.

the course of history and responds to it with a journalistic directness and a readiness of spirit quite unlike the strictly 'academic' critical attitude of both Leavis and Trilling.

CRITICISM AND MORALITY: IN PURSUIT OF A NEW CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE GOOD  
IN LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

This brings me to the distinctiveness of the essentially moral or ethical discourse of the three critics discussed here. Leavis's moral conception of literature and criticism is the centre around which his whole critical edifice is erected. From his first articles in the late twenties to his last essays in the mid-seventies morality signifies a set of concepts which serve as the undisputed standard for any critical appraisal of literature or criticism. Trilling's work is equally characterized from beginning to end by the almost total fusion of the categories of the moral and the literary. From his *Matthew Arnold* until his late essays in the seventies Trilling's published output leaves us in no doubt as to whether he considered literature a supremely moral discourse whose sole end should be moral instruction and not merely aesthetic pleasure. In both these two cases, morality and the concept of literature as moral discourse are immediately recognisable threads that run through the entire work of the respective critics.

Sartre's case, on the other hand, is quite different. There are certain of his texts that can and should be read as essentially moral treatises. But in the conceptual universe of his entire work morality and literature occupy a rather small space. Yet, that does not mean that moral or ethical questions in general do not have a prominent place in the Sartrean *oeuvre*. What it does mean, in my opinion, is that the instances where the moral and the aesthetic are discussed together only constitute part of a wider network of Sartre's texts where the issue of ethics in society is at the very centre of the arguments put forward. One has to consider texts quite different from each other in intention or scope to find that unifying thread that coheres them into a thematic set. This thread as I have argued does exist and it is what makes texts

such as those collected in *What is Literature?* find an echo in his Rome Lecture on ethics and politics.

This conceptual thread is of course the question of ethics and more specifically the necessity to define as precisely as possible the ethics that can complement a radical politics of the Left. This is Sartre's main concern when it comes to the question of ethics and society, a concern that sets a whole series of critical and interpretive interventions in motion, interventions which are far greater in scope than the issues at the heart of this discussion. It may be said that Sartre's work surveys an area, parts of which are also covered by the critical works of Leavis and Trilling. Although this may be partly true, it is, I believe, a question of an entirely different orientation and methodology. As I have argued, Leavis and, to a lesser extent, Trilling allude to politics but never quite bring the political content of their work to the surface, to the level of denotation. Sartre does quite the opposite: he discusses literature concentrating from the outset on the political implications of his subject-matter, going from the specific (i.e. the situation of the writer during the forties in France) to the more general (i.e. the attitude of the writer vis-à-vis the exigencies of a radical socialist politics) in a manner that dialectically relates both to each other.

It is interesting to see the extent to which Sartre's critical methodology is different from Leavis's. Leavis pre-emptively invalidates any dialectical consideration by concentrating solely and exclusively on the metaphysically endorsed supremacy of culture, mainly transmissible through canonical literature. In his idealistic fervour, Leavis leaves hardly any room in his thought for a conception of ethics, literature and society that acknowledges the interrelation of ideas and material reality in a way that does not pre-legitimize the former. Arguably, Sartre also started as an idealist only soon to adopt a more materialistic view of cultural and social phenomena. When he did effectively come to acknowledge that the constitutional idea of his early philosophy, namely absolute freedom, may be sound from the point of view of a metaphysician but immensely problematic in the context of what is actually happening in

society at large, he proceeded to discuss ethics in general or in the more specific context of literature in a way that continuously referred back to the material presuppositions of any ethical or literary system. This dialectical, reflexive quality of Sartre's thought is what is most clearly evidenced in his writings on ethics.

Fragmentary and without ever providing a conclusive argument they point towards something very distant from the unshakable certainties of Leavis. They are also quite different from the more nuanced writings of Trilling although for quite different reasons. Trilling's writings may not betray the same absolutistic tendencies as Leavis's do, but they too show a deep-seated belief in the supremacy of the ethical as a notional component of liberal thought. The political significance of Trilling's literary ethics lies in his whole-hearted acceptance of the supreme validity of middle-class liberal ideas. Yet, unlike Leavis who created a critical system whose Manichaeism is all too apparent Trilling, as a critic, proceeded with far more caution and with far more appreciation of the moral middle-ground that lies between the two extremes of ethics. In that moral middle ground, which in many ways is the natural habitat of Trilling's literary criticism, he puts forward a series of closely interconnected arguments that seek to displace politics, particularly radical politics and put ethics in its place. The difference with Leavis, as I have already argued, is that Trilling did not ever wish to have politics disappear from our sights as something totally irrelevant but instead he wished us to see it transmuted into a moral-aesthetic pedagogy. The problem was that this suppression of politics only succeeded in having it return as a spectre that haunted his arguments. His work from the late-fifties onwards testifies to that. It is this suppression of politics that defines his work and sets it apart from Sartre's. The latter, as I have argued, has managed to avoid this very act of suppression allowing the political to constantly interrogate the ethical and vice versa in such a way as to finally show the almost unbearable tension these two aspects of human praxis produce in our particular historical period. The negotiation of this tension and the elaborate series of arguments about the

consequences of such a tension for both an ethical politics and a political or politicized ethics is, in my opinion, one of Sartre's marks of distinction.

Leavis, Trilling and Sartre all represent three instances of twentieth-century critical thought each dealing with the relation between morality, politics and literature in a manner distinctly different from the others. Leavis's suppression of politics was so fierce that one may be tempted to characterize his critical attitude as very much akin to neurosis. In support of this one may cite Leavis's systematic refusal to acknowledge anything other than his own critical value-system allowed. Trilling's own treatment of politics in his work on morality and literature also testifies to a suppression, but one hardly as absolute as Leavis's. Trilling was too socially-minded to completely succeed in exiling the political from his thought. Eventually politics would come back as an assorted collection of images, ideas, beliefs and attitudes all symbolizing an ominous reality whose political negativity Trilling experienced as alarming and even threatening. Sartre is the only one here whose work does not show symptoms of that suppression of the political that is the distinctive feature of bourgeois thought. That is not to say that Sartre's work is totally irreproachable, but rather that it becomes significant to the extent that it shows us that ethics without the acknowledgement of an underlying politics of power is a delusional and utterly futile attempt to safeguard at least the notion of universal good and justice, while at the same time ignoring or implicitly supporting the conditions of generalised injustice, which, it must be emphasized, is what makes such an attempt possible in the first place. Sartre's work also shows us that any politics, especially radical politics, that neglects to self-reflexively interrogate its own ethical foundations runs the constant risk of merely reproducing the very system that it wishes to replace in the first place.

In replying to a question touching on the interrelation of politics and ethics in his work the French philosopher Jacques Rancière claimed that:

It is when politics no longer exists that we begin to look for a mere ethics, and that we try to base politics on ethics. We appeal to the moral individual who supposedly exists inside the political individual, and who is supposedly the ultimate foundation, the ultimate guardian of the great principles. But there is no such thing as a moral individual who is more moral than the political individual. The moral individual always obeys *a certain morality*. And there are all sorts of moralities. Believing that we have to kill the 'infidel', or that Jews are not human, is also a matter of morality. It is when politics fails that we see all these 'moralities' coming into play. (Rancière, 1997: 36)

What I have implicitly argued in these pages is that there is a very thin line indeed that separates ethics and politics. I have also claimed that all discourses focusing on questions of ethics and morality are nothing but thinly disguised political discourses, best interpreted in the context of the unequal distribution of cultural, political and economic power. I have tried to show that a critical discourse inspired by moral principles attracts and at the same time repels politics thus producing texts which may be read in a such a way so as to yield their implicit political content. This is what I have attempted to do by discussing the work of Leavis, Sartre and Trilling.

In an era when an increasing number of those in power resort to a naïve and reactionary moralistic discourse in their attempt to legitimise their totally immoral actions and, in the far more marginal field of literary studies, a significant number of theorists turn their attention to ethics in speaking of literature, it is worth re-examining our past in order to understand the hidden logic behind this celebrated and, at the same time, very ambiguous turn to ethics. I hope that what I have argued so far may be construed as a first step towards such a re-examination.

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